

A movie poster for 'Half Moon Chambers'. The background is a warm, orange-toned image of a man with a muscular torso, wearing an open dark jacket and a dog tag necklace, looking upwards. In the upper right, there is a close-up of a woman's face with long, dark hair. In the lower right, a staircase leads up into a dimly lit hallway. The overall mood is dramatic and mysterious.

HARPER FOX

HALF MOON  
CHAMBERS

The book cover features a man with a muscular torso, wearing an open dark jacket and a necklace with a dark pendant. He is looking upwards. In the background, there is a faint, ethereal image of a woman's face and a hallway with stairs. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by oranges and yellows.

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to the memory of Margaret Louise Stafford,  
2 April 1932 – 8 September 2012:  
a wonderful mum.

HALF MOON CHAMBERS  
Harper Fox

# Chapter One

*June*

Orange streetlight fought with neon for possession of my desk. Neither was winning. I'd have liked to put out the overheads, then the streetlamp bulb, and let the dark come down. Our last squad-room renovation had given me my own office—well, a cubicle, but better than nothing, and I had a window. Beyond it lay all the beauty of a northern city night, a sky of midsummer violet. I'd walked down to the station for my late shift in my civvies; jeans and a light cotton shirt. It was Saturday, lairy lads and lasses tumbling around in the streets, falling or getting pushed out of clubs. No-one had looked at me twice. Briefly I'd enjoyed the fantasy of being part of the crowd.

But I wasn't. The reality was better still. I'd sprung up the steps of Mansion Street police station, ignored the lift and torn up the sixteen flights of steps just for a workout. I'd got changed, whistling, into my uniform. Then I'd sauntered into the deserted squad room, fetched myself a coffee, and sat down at my desk.

I was expecting a quiet shift, and just as well. Every rung of the ladder of police promotion had a bigger pile of paperwork waiting on it, as far as I could see. The backlog confronting me now was my own fault, of course. I'd spent every spare minute for the last two weeks on the range, working through all our available police weaponry, from handguns to the coveted HK MP-7 armour-piercing rifles. Tonight I'd come in early, determined to catch up. My team was off on a refresher course at the Ponteland HQ. Not me, though. My schedule was different now.

I pushed back from my desk, as far as my cubbyhole's confines would allow. Yes, I wished I could sit here alone in the unadulterated dark, just for a short time. I didn't know how many more Newcastle midnights I would see, and despite everything I would miss their deep galactic blue. The city wasn't so big that you couldn't escape from it by a short drive, and beyond it were hills, rolling Pennines whose green shoulders I could see from this

very window on a clear day. It wouldn't be like that in London. A month ago I'd had a letter that had changed everything.

No, I wasn't just a city lad. Born and brought up in its meanest suburbs, educated in its war-zone schools, I had nonetheless scrambled up here, eight storeys away from the late-night party boys brawling and puking in the streets below. I was a police officer. Detective Sergeant Vince Carr of the drug squad, eight floors up and destined to go higher. The letter, which I kept discreetly folded but always within sight beneath my mountain-rescue award paperweight, was a summons to try out for a special-ops training programme with the Met, a new unit being formed in the capital to tackle drugs and gang warfare. They wanted men and women from the cities where these problems were endemic, where officers had cut their teeth on them. They wanted tough bastards like me.

I knocked back my coffee, enjoying the scald. They could have me, that was for sure. I loved my northern skies, but everything under them I could leave without one pang of regret. I was ready.

My desk phone rang, making me jump—on the inside only, as I had been taught. The coffee didn't even ripple in its polystyrene cup. I picked up. The call was an internal one. “DS Carr.”

“Carr? Inspector Monroe. In my office, please—now.”

I hesitated—just for a heartbeat, not long enough to be considered an impertinence. The stacks of unattended files loomed over me. I'd really thought I might get away with it tonight... “Yes, sir. On my way.”

Well, I was in trouble now. Monroe had sounded grim. I got up, tucking my shirt more neatly into my uniform trousers and straightening my tie. Whatever lay in store for me, it would be worse if I kept him waiting. Nevertheless, I didn't hurry. I could feel a burgeoning smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, and I carefully smoothed it out. A light was on in the office at the far end of the corridor—an interview booth, technically speaking, and one of the few spaces in the open-plan squad room that gave a little privacy.

I pushed the door open. Jack Monroe looked up solemnly from the desk. He was gorgeous, six feet tall, blond as a wheatfield, and no more an inspector than I was. He was my partner, on the streets and occasionally in my bed, and he'd be carrying off the whole senior-officer thing better if he'd been wearing a shirt, or anything at all from the waist up. “DS Carr,” he

said, tapping an imaginary file on the desktop. Only the tiniest wobble in his voice betrayed him. “This is serious. Very serious indeed.”

“I can see that. For God's sake, Jacky—I came in to do my paperwork.”

“Then by all means feel free to go back to it.”

He was grinning at me now. He'd laced his hands behind his head, displaying the breadth of his shoulders, the musculature across his chest. Jack too had had his letter from the Met. We were going there to train as partners. He was wild, irreverent, unscrupulous with witnesses, constantly in hot water with our real inspector for insubordination. He was the man I wanted with me on the London streets. I said, unconvincingly, “This is stupid. What if anyone from B group gets here early?”

“By all means give them a display. Or you could shut that soundproof door and come here.”

I shut the door. The trouble with Jack Monroe was his instant, drug-like effect on me. One glance of the right sort from him and I might as well be mainlining Viagra. If he sometimes played rougher than I liked—if sometimes, like tonight, he chose a time and place that could screw both of our hard-won careers in a second—I never held out against him. I told myself I could, but I'd never tested that by trying. I was hard and ready for him now, pulse racing, desperate to play out his game. “What's it to be, then, Inspector—my place or yours?”

“Don't ask silly questions, Carr.”

I nodded. The truth was that my place was a bit sore from our encounter in the locker room the day before, but there was no point in telling him that. Things didn't always go his way. Like many a strong man before him, occasionally he liked to be wrestled into submission, and I could do that. I was shorter than he was but wiry and powerful. Tonight, though, he was going to fuck me—right here, across a desk in the squad room. Excitement tore through me. He got up, the chair crashing over behind him.

We tussled briefly. I was on the losing end tonight, by prior arrangement, and I hung on to the thought that my surrender was as simple as that. I needn't have been slammed belly-down over the desk if I didn't like it. He flattened an experienced hand on my shoulder. Painless restraint of a downed suspect, that was, and he wasn't shy of other business moves either. English coppers didn't tell detainees to spread 'em—*please stand with your feet apart, sir*—but Jack liked to cross the Atlantic with me in



that regard, and I assumed the position before he could snarl the command at me. I undid my belt and zip before he could get to them himself—cried out in protest and lust as he yanked down my trousers. All of this was what I wanted. I summoned it. “Come on. Get on with it.”

“Wait a sec.”

“What?”

“Brought the lube this time. Didn't mean to screw you to ribbons the other day.”

I lost a breath in laughter. “Oh, my God. And they say chivalry's dead.” I rested my brow on the coffee-stained surface of the desk while his fingers worked on me, spreading the lubricant inside. I loved that—loved to be touched and handled. We seldom had time, though, and beyond the barest prep he wasn't taking chances now. The head of his big cock pushed at me. Nerves and excitement had tightened me up. I moaned as he slowly thrust inside, drove my nails into my palms in a luxuriant anguish of penetration. The trouble with Jack Monroe was that I loved him. DS Carr's best-kept secret, that one. We worked together. We fucked spectacularly. We had everything two ambitious northern lads could want as we scaled the career ladder. Love was for civilians, for little people, little lives.

Oh, but I loved the bastard. The confession nearly burst from me then and there, as he started to screw me, his first big movements shaking and melting my bones. I bit down hard on my lip. He was so bright and perfect. If we fucked looking into a mirror—and he liked that—I would have to close my eyes. I didn't know why his beauty had allied itself to my ordinary face and form, not when we were brought together like that. Didn't know what he saw in me.

I loved him for seeing it. I spreadeagled myself on the desk, the first buzz of climax beginning in my fingertips and toes. I tightened and released the muscles of my backside, resisting the shove of his cock. The friction rebounded on both of us—he groaned and swore at me, and a cramping pressure rolled down through me, hard enough to push him out if he hadn't been buried so deep. “Bastard,” he rasped. “Don't bloody crush me.”

“Gonna come.”

“Oh, yeah. Oh, doesn't take much, does it? Hold on, Vinnie—I'll get you there.”

My mobile phone started to ring. At first I confused the sound with the singing roar of blood in my ears, but then it got through to me. Jack had told me—as a complaint—that I was a copper over, under and before everything else, and he was right. Even now I wasn't so lost in the action that I could ignore the damn phone. I made a flailing grab for my pocket.

“Vince! Don't you fucking—dare!”

“Got to get it. Might be—”

He yanked my arm up my back. “*I said no!*”

*You arsehole*, I thought dimly. I would take this out of him later. But my body's tide rose in spite of myself and him, and I stifled a scream on my wrist and came, painfully hard, bucking wildly in his restraint. Then there were thirty gritted-teeth seconds while he got there himself. Never spared me in the aftermath, did Jack—took his time, banging me hard enough to knock the heavy desk inch by inch sideways. I groaned in relief when he loosed his familiar cry—always a triumph in it, like he'd won, and to hell with all other contenders—and went soft.

He slid out of me, panting. I pushed upright and hauled the phone out of my pocket. “Great, Jack. Fucking great. That was Chrissy.”

“Oh, right. Your junkie brother's dope-head girlfriend. Can see why you're pissed you missed that.”

“Chrissy's clean now. She's trying to help him.”

Off in the depths of the building, the lift doors clanged. We both jumped. Automatically I handed him his shirt, and he began to tuck mine back into my trousers. “If you recall,” he said bitterly, “last time you and me got drunk together, you told me your brother Phil was everything you wanted to leave behind in this godforsaken city. You said—and I quote—you hated his guts, and him and his kind were the reason you became a copper in the first place.”

I stared at him. I had said all those things. I'd meant them, too. I'd been running around after Phil since he'd nicked his first bottle of prescription pills out of our mam's knicker drawer. I hated him. No point in my coming across all saintly and compassionate now. “I've still got to call her back.”

“You'd better be quick about it, then. Boss is in a hurry.”

I glanced through the porthole glass. There went Inspector Bill Hodges, the off-shift commander, jogging purposefully down the corridor, and thank God he hadn't glanced in at me. I hit callback, and let Jack redo my tie as

the line rang out. “Chrissy,” I said when she picked up. “Sorry I missed you. I...”

She was crying, or trying hard not to. I heard her electronically filtered gulp for control. “Vince. It's Phil. He's... Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Why?”

“You sound like you've just finished a marathon.”

“Oh. Yeah, I...” I ran a hand over my head, glad my hair was cropped short enough not to allow for dishevelment. “I'm on an op. Been running.”

“God, I'm sorry to call you at work! Phil's disappeared. He met up with some mates of his this afternoon and he never came home. He promised me he wouldn't touch anything, but it was Joe Bates and that mob. He never—”

“All right. Calm down. I'll see if I can get someone to cover my desk, and I'll run a car past some of his haunts. He'll turn up.”

“Thank you! Oh, Vince, what are we going to do when you're not here any more to...”

I didn't hear the end of it. Jack's hand had closed around mine, his thumb coming down on the cut-off button. I opened my mouth to snarl at him, but he pressed one finger to my lips. “No. Shut up and listen. If Bill's that excited, something's up—something big. Don't let Phil make you miss it. You said it yourself—he's been making you miss things for years. I don't want to be a hardarse, but he does it to himself. And if I don't try and stop you, he'll find some way of...” He paused, some of his post-orgasmic flush fading away. I so seldom saw him anything other than cheerfully composed that I swallowed my protests. “He'll find some way of keeping you here, and screw things up for both of us. He'll make you miss your whole life.”

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Jack had been right. Something big had come up, big enough to call in our back-up group from their beds and their weekend amusements. Our own squad were on their way back from Ponteland HQ as well. They would be here soon, arriving as silently as we had on the Sunderland quayside, coasting in, lights dimmed. I sat in the dark van, waiting. The River Tyne was beautiful here, and I had an unimpeded view. Ship lights and streetlights glimmered in the water, and over on the north bank rose the sheer planes of the Glass Centre, a rare success of an endeavour in this post-

industrial desert, where bones of the disused shipyards lay everywhere, skeletal shapes of cranes starred with warning lights for passing aircraft. My nieces and nephews loved the Glass Centre. You could go there and learn to make paperweights, or even blow your own decorative vase, or walk on the transparent floors a dizzying hundred feet above the workshops. My struggling city was trying for rebirth. And I adored her, but the pangs had been going on for decades now, and I couldn't stay and watch any more.

We also had a thriving drugs trade. Bill Hodges had taken a tip-off that a shipment from Denmark was coming up-Tyne on freighter boats that night. The intel was good, he had told us as we buckled up our body armour in the locker room. Rock solid. There would definitely be action for those who cared to tackle it tonight, enforcement against the traffickers, both parties armed. In for the opposition, Goran Maric, a smack and cocaine baron of the highest standing all along my native riverbanks. Jack and I had been fighting to put the bastard down for years. And if we got him, we opened a trail to someone far more prestigious even than this local hero – Val Foster, a near-legendary figure who ran Maric and dozens of kingpins like him right across the country.

I spared a glance from the shimmering water. Jack was sitting by me in the van, making a last check of his pistol and ammo. His face was serene. If there was a trace of self-satisfaction in the curve of his lips, I supposed he had a right to it. He'd scored twice tonight, hadn't he? Pinned me to the desk, stopped me from tearing off after Phil. I'd soon forgiven him for hanging up on poor Chrissy. As soon as Bill Hodges had told us the stakes, my blood had been up, my fingers itching for the Glock 26 I'd made such good friends with on the firing range. I'd taken a 17 into raids a few times, but the 26 was the Met police special, so Jack and I had been working solidly with that.

I noticed that the shoulder strap of his ballistic vest hadn't quite engaged with its Velcro pad. I reached to fix it, and he gave me a quick, sweet smile. I'd been right to come with him. This was where I belonged. I had a prickle of transition in my bones, the sense of a shift in the weather. Tonight was a night when everything could change.

Bill Hodges made a swift, silent gesture, and the fifteen officers in the van came to attention. Two medium-sized freighters had just rounded the

bend in the river. I watched, not without some respect for Goran Maric's cheek. This was a busy quayside, though quiet at this hour. Delivering his goods along with two shiploads of Danish flatpack furnishings was akin to hiding in plain sight, and very bold. The freighters slowed and began to make for the vacant berths below our position. It was time.

At Jack's side, I slipped out of the van and down the grassy slope from the road. My senses were keenly alive. I was at once tautly focussed and aware of all the scents, sounds and visions of the night—seagulls mewing, their cries bouncing off the metal warehouse roofs all around, their wings catching dull, eerie orange light from below. I could smell the water, so much cleaner now than when I'd been growing up, but still rich with mud and decay. Jack reached the dockyard ahead of me and flattened himself against a wall, waving at me to do the same. I obeyed him, puzzled. We each had our assigned positions and a set time to get there before the boats landed. We were dark for communications unless plans changed, and my Airwave unit had remained silent. "What is it?"

"Thought I saw someone."

"Boss had the yard cleared, didn't he?"

"Yeah. But still—"

I grabbed his wrist. He was right. The line of the rooftop nearest us was broken by a crouched human shape. Not one of our lads, unless he'd flown there. "Shit," I whispered. "Jack, this might be a bust. Let Bill know."

I had one chance. If my unit was walking into a trap, I could take down this one gunman—I could see his weapon now, a nasty-looking sniper rifle—while Jack warned the rest of our task force to hang back. The sniper hadn't seen me yet. The night was warm. I only had to unhitch my Glock from beneath my light uniform jacket, and the weight of it came easy to my hand. A cold fire sprang up beneath my heart. Yes, Phil did it to himself—every hopeless crackhead in the city did—but men like this one on the roof gave them the wherewithal to keep on doing it. London was the place where I would hack off the monster's head, but it would be my pleasure to slice away one of its coiling tentacles right here. Silently I prowled along the warehouse wall, and I took aim.

Someone punched me in the back. No—not a punch, but I couldn't connect the crack I had heard with the impact on my spine. I wheeled

around, or I tried. My legs went out from under me and I sprawled face-down onto the concrete.

I couldn't have been shot. Being shot would hurt, and nothing did. Some other explanation, then, for the sound and the blow and my fall. I'd find out when I pushed up and sprang to my feet. I bunched my muscles ready for the action.

Nothing. Like putting a car into gear without switching on the engine. I tried again, and now pain did hit, a golden chrysanthemum flash. Writhing away from it flipped me onto my back. I could see seagulls, orange clouds, stars. I choked down a howl. Mustn't embarrass Jack. Jack would be somewhere nearby, hunting down my hunter, making everything right. What had he said to me? *Hold on, Vinnie. I'll get you there.*

I waited. Breath heaved into my lungs, exploded back out of them with a coppery tang that filled my nostrils and my throat. I didn't want to make all this noise but something had cut the wires between my intentions and their results. I was lonely. The force of that surprised me. But Jack would come. *Hold on, Vinnie.*

A shadow fell across me. I stared up at the stark silhouette of a man and a rifle. It wasn't Jack—not any of my colleagues, because although we'd agitated for these new armour-piercing HK MP-7s, we hadn't got them, apart from the training-gallery samples. Not within budget for a northern squad, so I was meeting this one from the wrong end. I almost laughed. Talk about living and dying by the sword...

A tiny movement behind the gunman's shoulder caught my attention. Jack was there, thank God. I tried not to look, not to blow his game. I'd be all right now, even if I had been hit, or at least I'd die in friendly arms. Jack would get to me. He'd find a way.

He turned. He was staring straight at me, then he wasn't – his head was up, like a fox scenting the air. I hung on. I squeezed my eyes shut so I wouldn't betray him. Only another second or so now.

Footsteps scraped, and my eyes flew open against my will. There was only empty air behind the gunman now, a drift of orange rain. No – in the very far distance, dissolving into blood and tears, a running figure, dodging round a corner, vanishing into the night. I didn't understand. Then I did, and I wished I'd been killed outright first. Now a cry did rise up in me. I let it go

—that and the one riding hard on its tail, and then the mortifying inrush of a sob. Jack was gone.

The pool of wet heat under me began to spread, and I started to care less about things. The gunman stood over me. He looked thoughtful, as if wondering where to put his kill shot. *Head's best*, I wanted to tell him. *Heart's a block of ice now anyway*. I was young to die, but I couldn't feel it as a tragedy. Twenty nine was hardly a kid, and I'd done a lot, answered a lot of my ambitions. Probably packed more in than most people twice my age...

What else had Jack said to me? It had made an impression, a deeper one even than the sight of his fleeing back. It was my last thought and I plunged after it as it fluttered away from me into the vortexing dark. *He'll make you miss your life*. Jack had meant Phil, but now I knew that was wrong. I'd missed the point somehow. It was me, my fault. Somehow I'd missed my own life.

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Infinite darkness delivered me back to a cold profane black that stank of antiseptic. For a long while I tried to dissolve myself once more. I'd been so far away, but I hadn't minded—the distance had been full of stars. I didn't want what I had now. The surface beneath me felt cloudy and damp. Maybe I was still on the concrete at the dockyard, or on a slab in the morgue. A prickling heavy numbness was weighing me down. The only sensation making it through to my brain was an intense discomfort in my cock, as if someone had rammed a tube up there, for what arcane pleasure I couldn't begin to imagine...

“Vince? Vinnie? Nurse, is he awake? I saw him move again.”

“Hold on. I'll get the doctor.”

Doctor. Nurse. Okay, I had clues now. I hadn't made detective for nothing—could put two and two together and come up with a hospital. The mental effort exhausted me, though, and I drifted again, a little way back out into the sea of stars.

“Vincent?”

That made me twitch. Only my mother ever called me Vincent, and even then only when I was in the deepest trouble. *In trouble*, I thought,

seeing inside my head my tiny cubbyhole office at Mansion Street, then for some reason my desk phone, and then in a dazzling flicker my partner Jack Monroe, sitting with no shirt on in an interview booth. *I'm in trouble now.* I wanted to laugh but my lungs didn't have that much spontaneity left to them. They inflated without any help from me, gave up their air a second later with a mechanised hiss, filled again.

"Detective Sergeant Carr? You're in the Freeman hospital. You've had an operation, but you're going to be fine. Vincent?" A pause, and I felt fingers at my wrist, a thumb lifting one eyelid then the other. My pupils contracted painfully against the beam of a torch, but I couldn't make it mean anything. "What do his friends call him?"

"Er, Vince. Sometimes Vinnie."

*No, Jack.* I wanted to reach out and give him a smack. *Only you call me Vinnie. No-one else would dare.*

"Okay. Vince, can you hear me?" I wanted to tell this cool-handed stranger that I could hear him just fine. Another twitch jerked at the muscles of my arm. "All right. Good lad. Don't worry, Detective Sergeant Monroe. He is responding. He was awake for a little bit this afternoon. We'll have him back with us shortly."

"Awake? I asked the staff nurse to give me a call if he—"

"Oh, it was just a few minutes. And he was very confused. Not worth calling you in for."

"Do you think he remembers what happened?"

"About the shooting? Very likely not. I know you'll need his report, but you might have to wait for a long time yet. He had massive trauma, and he'll need a while to get over the surgery too."

*Surgery...* Yes, I was definitely getting a grasp on things now. Nurse, doctor, surgery.

*The shooting.*

"Doc, his hand clenched. What does that mean?"

"He's surfacing. He can probably hear us, so mind what you say. Vince, you've had an op to take a bullet from your back. You're a lucky man, believe it or not—it missed your spine by an inch." The cool hand closed on mine. I was feeling quite rude by now, like a society hostess neglecting her guest, and I tried to return the grasp. "There you go. He's responding to my grip. There's another bullet lodged in there, Vince, and we'll need to operate



again, but for now you'll be fine. Can you wake up for me now? Vince? Vinnie?"

I couldn't wake up for him—not quite. One more swimmer's thrust toward the surface would have done it, but now I had too much to think about. He'd taken a bullet from my back. There was something almost comical to me in that, a kind of cartoon-style shame. Cowboys from my dad's collection of paperback Westerns, relics from days when men said to one another, *only a coward gets shot in the back, son. You deserve it for running away.*

No. Not me. I hadn't been running. The doctor was still talking—to me, to Jack, I couldn't tell. Then definitely to the nurse, ripping a strip off her about a badly fitted catheter. I wanted to tell him to leave her alone, but then there was some bustle and tugging down there, and the discomfort eased. I had to admit that was better. I could sleep again now. The starfield was waiting. Among those shimmering lights and blue-white fires, all the human nonsense burned to ash. Cowardice, abandonment, betrayal, running away—all that stuff came from the flesh, from being an animal, a skinful of hormones, adrenaline, reflexes. It couldn't exist in the dark between the stars. I fell back into it gladly, arms outstretched as if for flight—*one way, thank you. Doctor, you can keep my ticket home.*

## Chapter Two

*August*

“Come on, mate. You can do better than that.”

I took a critical look at the chessboard set up on the table hooked across my bed. Yes, Jack was right. I could do a hell of a lot better. My last move had laid my queen's rearguard open to half a dozen threatening advances. I could see it now, though I'd shoved my castle almost at random across the board, driven by a blinding spasm of pain. I was due another morphine shot. Complaining or moaning wouldn't make these come any quicker, and I'd learned a habit of clenching my jaws and doing something else—anything, no matter how stupid—until the wave passed. It didn't always work out for me. I'd used to be able to beat Jack hollow at chess. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Take the move again.”

“Don't fucking patronise me.”

A silence fell in the sunny room. My elevated status as a copper injured on duty had won me a commendation and a private hospital bed. The cupboards and cabinets were bright with flowers, most of them with tongue-in-cheek tags on them from my unsentimental friends and colleagues. You never knew how popular you were until you got knocked off your perch. I looked up into the blue eyes fixed on mine. I wished I could read their expression. They were so clear, it should have been easy, and I saw the compassion, the faint trace of hurt. But there was something else too—a shadow. “Sorry,” I said again. “No, I'll stand by it. Maybe it's part of my master plan.”

“Only if you're planning to get trounced again. Is your back hurting?”

“What do you fucking think?”

Oh, God. I leaned forward as far as I could bear to, pressing my fingers to my mouth. Eight weeks after the Sunderland raid, I'd moved from deadly ill to merely surly. I couldn't seem to help myself. My healing scars itched. The morphine disagreed with me. The pain was turning from a disabling scream to a constant background nag. I managed to keep a lid on it around the hospital staff, but Jack got it in the neck every time. I didn't know why. It was something to do with that fucking shadow in his eyes—so new, so

alien to him. Perfectly familiar to me in other men's eyes—eyes that insolently met or tried to avoid mine across an interrogation-room table.

His hand closed on my shoulder. I stiffened, but then he stroked the back of my head, a gesture far more tender than any he'd shown me before. He'd been very good, very tolerant. He'd hardly missed a single visiting hour. "It's okay," he said softly. "Stupid fucking question. I'll go get someone to help."

"No." I grabbed his wrist. "Jacky, forgive me. Look, can we call it a day on this game?"

"Yeah. Course. Anything you want."

"I think I want..." I sat back. I could see late-summer foliage shifting in the wind beyond the hospital car park. Doc Richardson, my surgeon, had said he wanted to try and get me walking tomorrow. That would be nice—to have those trees within my reach again, in theory anyway. My world had shrunk from a grand encompassment of two major cities to a ten-by-ten cell. I hadn't been able to think too clearly about the implications until now. "I want you to go and get back to whatever you should be doing at half six on a weekday night. It's August now, isn't it?"

"That's right, Detective. August the fifteenth. Is that a problem for you?"

"Yes, because... Because your secondment to the special-ops training programme starts on the 20th. You should be at the gym. Or on the range, or the assault course, or... anyway, not lollygagging around in here with the mardiest bastard on planet. Go on."

"Oh, Vince." Again, that gentle hand on the back of my head. "I'm not going anywhere on the 20th, okay? The Met said they'd wait our application until you were better again."

"What?"

"Well, as if I'd go without you! They head-hunted us as a partnership, remember."

"Yes, before... Look, don't be stupid. Hodges might find me a desk job up here, but as for the Met—special ops, running and jumping and gangsters—I'm finished. We both know that."

Jack exhaled sharply. He got up and went to the window, banging his hip on a chair-back en route. It was so unlike him to be clumsy. He was nervous and distracted. Come to think of it, he'd been like that every time

he'd visited. Well, he didn't like hospitals. Maybe there was nothing more to it than that. "Fuck's sake, Vince. How can you give up so soon? You haven't even tried your walking physio yet."

"That's right. They wanted to start me last week. But the bullet I've still got jammed in my back started shifting around, and they daren't operate again in case they paralyse me from the waist down." I tried to smooth the ragged bitterness from my voice, though hearing this bald statement of my own case chilled me with fear. "So... I've got to learn to walk before I can run, and before that I've got to learn to get to the bog on my own. As for the Met—forget it. And don't for one second think of staying up here because of me."

Jack turned from the window and stood with his arms folded. I couldn't see his face against the light. For a moment I thought he was going to talk to me—truthfully, with a force that would dispel the shadows. But then he broke into the low, wicked chuckle I knew so well. "Ah, Vinnie. You're just wallowing."

"I'm... *what?*"

"You heard me. You're cooped up here, in pain, and you're grumpy as fuck because you're not getting any."

Before I could find an answer he was back at my bedside. He sat down and unhitched our chess table, swinging it out of the way. I had time to breathe a prayer of thanks that my catheter had been removed, and then his hand was under the blanket and closing on my cock. Okay. He'd done it now. Just as well I wasn't hooked up any more to my monitors—the crash team would have been through the door in ten seconds. My jaw dropped, the air stopping dead in my lungs.

I fell back on the pillows. The movement hurt like hell, but not half so much as it would have done without the rush of endorphins this one touch had released. Nevertheless I grabbed his wrist. "Christ! Stop. The nurse'll be in here any minute."

"Yeah? Bet you I can make you come before she does."

"Jack! You're a fucking nutcase, you are... Pack it in!"

But the connections I'd half feared had been severed were apparently still firing away. I couldn't believe the surge of my response. Mortified, I tried to shrink away from him—from his knowledgeable hand, which seldom spent time in caressing or coaxing but sure as hell knew its business

when it came to jerking me off. I groaned, lifting an arm to cover my eyes. "You can't do this."

"You can't stop me. Ah—sexy little animal you are, bonny lad, ready and up for it even now..."

Looked as if I was. Not for the first time in a risky place, either. Memories rose up, thinning the mists of pain and shock in which I'd been floating for the last few weeks. We'd done it in the locker rooms, hadn't we? Once in the lift when Jack had jammed it between floors, and even in the squad room—an interview cell, just before the balloon went up on the night of the quayside raid. Then we'd gone out. The shoulder strap of his ballistic vest had been loose. I'd fastened it up for him. We'd run and slithered down the muddy banks to the dockyard, and...

There was a shadow in Jack's touch as well as in his eyes. What the fuck was it? My blood slowed, cutting off unnecessary supply, and I lost my erection as suddenly as he'd conjured it.

Guilt. That was what I was seeing. That was the shadow.

"Stop it. Please."

"Ah, Vince. It's just the drugs they've got you on."

"Yeah. Probably it is. But let me go, okay? I don't want this."

He withdrew his hand. "All right. It was doing you good, though. Bet if I sucked you off, you could..."

"Tell me about that night. The raid."

Jack flopped down into the chair by the bed. A long whooshing sigh escaped him. He ran a hand into his beautiful fair hair. "You know all about that already. I briefed Bill Hodges, and he said he'd told you."

"Yeah. He did. My memory's been screwed up, though, and... you were there with me."

"Okay. The raid was a bust. They were waiting for us. We walked into a trap, and you got cornered. You were trying to take out the sniper on the roof when another of the bastards fired from behind you."

"Bill said Sergeant Walsh shot both those gunmen."

"That's right. I got the call through, and Walshie came blazing in. He had a good vantage from the hill."

"You had a better one. You were right beside me."

Jack went pale. As always by this point of summer he was attractively tanned, and the alteration left him grey. "Yeah. I put the warning through to

Bill, and I saw some other guys—Maric's men—heading up towards our van. I had to go after them, Vince.” He hesitated, then banged his fist lightly off the arm of the chair. “Shit. I knew this would come up.”

“Why?”

“Bill made a huge fuss about it as well. Said I should have stuck with my partner, no matter what. Like I didn't feel the same way! But...”

“But there were no other guys. The freighters took off again the second the gunfire started.”

“All right, Vince Carr.” He was pissed off now. That was better—far more reassuring than his evasions. “Bill was pussyfooting around with this too. Why don't either of you have the guts to come out and say what you think?”

I couldn't. To say it would disgrace both of us. It was too mean, too low.

“You think I ran away.”

The words were so simple. Jack, delivering them, sounded like no-one I'd ever heard before. Certainly not himself. Defeated and empty and lost. My common sense reasserted itself—my daily-bread belief in the way things were. “No,” I said fervently, reaching for him. “Jesus, Jacky. I was down. I didn't know what the fuck was going on, but not that. Not that.”

He jerked his head up. When his eyes met mine I could see the wash of his sudden surprise and hope. “You don't believe it?”

“Of course not. Not for a second.”

“I did see those other gunmen. I...”

“All right. All right.” I pulled him down to sit on the bed, and I caught him when he pitched forward to bury his face in the blanket. I stroked his hair. “Oh, my God, you big pansy. Don't you dare bloody cry!”

\* \* \*

He came to see me less often after that. The visits didn't stop all at once—it took weeks, with one day missed and then another, his excuses always good. I was locked in battle with myself, my pain and a five-foot ogre of a physiotherapist who marched me daily from one end of the hospital to the other and back, and at first I hardly noticed the change. When he was there, our conversations were carefully ordinary. We never again plunged into memories of that night by the river, and he never made another improper

grab for me under the sheets. One afternoon all we could find to talk about—all that felt safe—was the weather, and after that he didn't reappear for a fortnight. At first I missed him, and then I was relieved.

In the last week before my discharge, I had two other visitors. One was Bill Hodges. I was glad to see him. He was a nice guy, the kind of senior officer you pray for as a rookie, barely notice when you're up there flying in your big ambitious sky, and thank God for when you fall. He'd organised everything—my sick pay, my bills, my insurance. He'd even hired a cleaner to water my plants and run a Hoover round my flat. Some of that, I'd supposed, might have been handled by Jack, but we weren't on those terms, not really. We'd run the streets together like wolves—a bright, knife-blade partnership—and we'd screwed.

Bill was very awkward. He fussed around with my water jug and plastic cups until he upset one, soaking the bed. “Oh. Damn, Vince, I'm sorry.”

“It's all right. We'll just say I had an accident.”

It was a poor effort at humour, and he just looked horrified. “Oh, no. I mean, you're not...”

“No! No, not at all. Fully functional in that regard. In fact I'm almost back on my feet again.” I smiled at him and plied a handful of tissues over the blanket. “I still have to spend a few hours a day flat on my back, but... Sit down, sir. What's the matter? Did my healthcare plan run out?”

“No. Um, it's Jack.”

*Jack ran out.* That was my mind's first absurd response. That was the dream that played in my head every night. Rainbow lights on the Tyne, and a concrete pavement, and my partner running past me, away from me into the dark. Well, he'd been chasing his gunmen. “Is he okay? I haven't seen him since...” Christ, I could hardly remember. “I think it's been nearly a month.”

“Yes. I mean—no, you wouldn't have. I don't know how to tell you this, son. DS Monroe left us. It was four days ago. He didn't turn up for work, and when we checked his flat it was empty. And a few days later—yesterday—I got an email from him saying he was in New York.” Bill rubbed his face. “Not the mining village off the A19. The big New York. On a stopover on his way out to Los Angeles.”

I took this in. It didn't seem so bad, not by contrast with my first understanding of *DS Monroe left us*. “Okay. Right. Has he taken some

leave?”

“That's the thing. No. He said he's got a job with a big US security concern, and he's staying. He apologised for skipping his notice, but he'd repaid his last salary cheque into our accounts, and... that was it. I'm sorry, Vince. He's gone.”

\* \* \*

My next visitor wasted no time getting to the point. I'd slept a lot in the couple of days since Bill had been to see me, which my doctors said was natural, part of the healing process. For me it was one more way of staying numb. I surfaced reluctantly at the sound of my name. A girl was sitting by my bed. It took me a moment to recognise her. “Chrissy?”

She looked awful. Her hair was in rat's tails, her eyes rimmed red. Vaguely I recalled someone telling me—Bill, Jack, someone—that my brother Phil was still on the loose. It hadn't really impinged. Phil spent more time AWOL than at home. Chrissy had backed a bad horse there—bad enough to carry her off with it into the swamps of addiction once more, it looked like. I was sorry. She was a nice woman when she was clean, and she'd done her best with Phil. We hadn't been close. It was good of her to come and see me.

“Vince, you bastard.”

I sat up. Doing so was no longer a grinding, minute-long tussle with unbearable pain, but it still wasn't easy. Okay. I wasn't in the mood for social niceties myself. “Hello to you too,” I grated out. “How's my feckless brother?”

“Your feckless brother is dead. They fished what was left of him out of the Tyne at South Shields. He'd been in there for about eight weeks, they reckon, though it's hard to tell from the bits.”

Her eyes were red from tears, not dope. I had been a good beat copper before the drug squad had hired me, and I knew the difference. The only other certainty I could grasp was the time frame. “Eight weeks?”

“Yeah. About the time he first went missing. I called you, Vince. You promised to look for him. You never did.”

A tiny spark of childish resentment flew up through the black wasteland opening inside of me. I clung to it. “Chrissy, for fuck's sake. I was working.



I... I got shot.”

“I know.” Abruptly she got to her feet. I waited for her to brain me with the water jug, or grab a pillow and ram it down over my face. “You're still a bastard. I just wanted you to know that.”

She turned and walked away. I wanted to call her back, but my throat had dried to dust. I watched her skinny back, her bony, proudly held shoulders. In the doorway she stopped. Not looking at me, she said, “The dumb thing is, if you'd done what you promised, you wouldn't have been on that raid. You stupid bastard, Vince—you'd never have been shot at all.”

## Chapter Three

*December*

“Vince, I reckon you can handle this one for us.”

I looked up from the papers on my desk, quickly flipping the page. I didn't want Bill Hodges to see I'd been staring at the same sheet since he'd last popped his head round my door. I nodded, reaching to take the file from his hand. “No problem. What is it?”

“That flighty witness in the Half Moon Chambers case. A lad called Rowan Clyde, works down the city gallery in their restoration wing. Hargreaves and Watts have been chasing him all over town, but he doesn't want to know. I thought I might send you along to his place of work. He can't run away from you there.”

I didn't flinch. Bill did, though, and I was sorry for him. Quickly I opened the file, drawing out the papers. “I thought we didn't need a third witness.”

“Most probably we won't. The first two are nervy, though, and if they flake out I want a backup ready. Now we've got Maric in custody, I want to keep the bastard. You know what depends on it. If we can keep him, he might give up Val Foster on a deal.”

“Yes, sir.” Goran Maric had finally blown it, not on a raid but in the transaction of a piece of private justice. A couple of Chinese students, quietly trading heroin out of their basement flat, had pushed their enterprise far enough to tread on his toes. Maybe he'd only meant to warn them, but things had got ugly fast. The screams had alerted the couple next door, who'd come out in time to see one of the kids dragged back into the flat by the hair and shot. Maric had made it out the fire exit. Not far this time, though – the neighbours had given enough of a description for officers to run him to earth and bring him in.

Other officers. Other firearms men, healthy and fresh to the fight. Bill Hodges had brought me the news like a gift, and I'd done my best to unwrap it gratefully. “Do we know if this Clyde guy saw anything useful?”

“He lives in the Chambers. Up on the top floor, but our scene-of-crime guys think they saw him in the ground-floor hall immediately after it

happened. He vanished when they tried to approach him, and they had their hands full.”

I examined the black-and-white photo clipped to the front of Clyde's papers. It was a decent surveillance shot of a young man emerging from the central archway of the Half Moon block. Impassively I picked out the features I'd need to identify him—lean build, verging on skinny, about 5'10”, very dark close-cut hair. Nothing special. When I'd gathered the details, I looked away. “All right. I'll go up there now.”

“Vince, would you like your desk moved back now? You'd be able to see better.”

I considered. I'd suffered from blinding headaches when I'd first come back to work, and I'd asked for my desk to be shifted from its old place by the window. There wasn't much room for manoeuvre, but now I could sit with my back to the light. A waste of a good window, of course, and I'd told Bill he could put someone else in there if he chose. He'd left me alone, though, and I'd taken the opportunity to have a bit of a clear-out. Souvenirs I'd collected like a teenager—comedy drinks mats, that ridiculous paperweight of a little glass man conquering his little glass mountain. A couple of inexpertly framed photos. I didn't miss my view. There was nothing to see on a day like today, when freezing fog hung heavy in Northumberland Street and the panes were still frosted at noon. “No, thanks. It's fine.”

“Right. Mind you take a cab up to the gallery.”

“It's not far. I'll walk it. I could drive myself, for that matter, if you'd let me take a car from the pool.”

“Not while you're still popping those painkillers, no.”

I looked at the squat white jar on my desk. My clear-out had left remaining objects a bit conspicuous. “It's my last batch. After these I'm on aspirin and gritted teeth, like everybody else.”

Bill pulled a sympathetic face. “Sorry. Still, at least we can review you for driving next month. Be nice to young Mr Clyde, won't you? I think we're the sensitive, artistic type.”

“I'll be the soul of tact.” Bill was turning to leave when a thought snagged at me. “Bill, can I ask you something?”

“Fire away.”

“Why are you sending me on a job that particularly requires diplomacy? I wouldn't have thought I'd be your first choice.”

“Well, Ban Ki Moon was busy today, so...” He leaned his shoulder on the doorframe. His smile faded. “Vince—don't take offence. I can understand your concerns about having more surgery. In your place I'd hesitate too. Mind, in your place I'd also be looking outside the police force for work. You're right, you're not my first choice for diplomatic missions.” He shook his head ruefully. “Far from it. But...”

“But I won't risk the op that might make me fit to do the work I used to, and you're trying to keep me busy.”

“I feel like a shit for talking to you like this. I know how hard you've worked to get back here. But I've got yet another bloody departmental-efficiency survey coming up, and...”

I got up. I could do so quite easily now. I'd gone from a geriatric-style walking frame to crutches, then one crutch, then an aluminium stick, all in the space of six weeks, and for the last fortnight I'd left the stick at home. I was doing fine. “Don't say any more. I get it.”

“If you knew how much we value you, Vince—how much I do personally—”

“I do know. Look, shove as much lightweight interview work as you need to my way. And I'll start thinking about alternatives, like you say.”

“Good man.” He glanced at his watch. “You can make this your last job of the day. Get what you can from Clyde, then knock off.”

When he was gone, I leaned on the desk and stared out into the bleak winter day, or as much of it as showed through the condensation and the wild extravaganza of ice-ferns and flowers crowding over the glass. After a moment I went and drew the blinds. Unlike the flighty Rowan Clyde, I wasn't subject to artistic tendencies. All I had ever wanted to be was a copper. But yes, I really was doing fine. As my physiotherapy ogre told me three times a week, and as I told the occupational counsellor once a month during my obligatory sessions with her, I was making a remarkable recovery. There was just nothing out there any more I particularly wanted to see.

\* \* \*

It made sense for me to finish my shift with this job. The Langring Art Gallery was on my way home, a couple of hundred yards down the road from the tower block where I kept my eyrie. I was all about making sense at the moment—regular meals and routines, sensible hours. Early to bed, and if I then lay wide-eyed and aching till dawn, I had been assured that this was normal, shock working through me in the form of insomnia. It would pass.

I loved the gallery. I'd been a man of action, but I wasn't an absolute Philistine. I'd brought my niece and nephews here often to mess around in the children's rooms, then taken them upstairs to admire the Victorian watercolours on permanent display and the enormous technicolour Biblical dreamscapes by our local nineteenth-century visionary, John Martin. They were nice kids, full of bounce but never any trouble. On our last visit, Lily had forgotten her new instructions with regard to Uncle Vince and come running to leap into my arms, and...

There was a bench in the courtyard a few feet away. I made it there and sat down, dismayed at the tide of dizzy nausea rushing through me. Maybe Bill had been right and I should have taken that cab. No other reason for this weakness—Lily had been fine. I'd gone down with her rather than let her fall, and we'd measured our length among the serene Grecian statues, much to her amusement and that of the wardens. I'd made a joke of it. But I'd also noticed for the first time all the vertiginous staircases in the building, the balconies, the slippery floors. Outside, the roar of the traffic had hit me and I'd seen, as if in a Martinesque vision, how narrow were the pavements, how fast a running child could get across them. Of course a second round of surgery would fix all that. Or not, but then at least the kids would know the score, and maybe they'd pop back during their university holidays and give Uncle Vince a shove in his wheelchair for old times' sake... I'd taken Lily and her siblings home that night and explained to my sister that my work hours were increasing, and the visits would probably stop for a while.

The early winter dusk was coming down. Lowering sunlight suddenly caught the courtyard pavement, and a million small indigo lights sparkled up beneath the feet of the shoppers and homebound passers-by. Living round the corner as I did, I hadn't thought much of the gallery's new paving when it was getting laid out—just ordinary biscuit-coloured slabs, until one

morning at dawn I'd seen the day's first sunshine hit the galaxy of blue-glass chips embedded in the concrete. The designer had underplayed his creation—except at sunrise and twilight it did look ordinary, and vandals and skater kids treated it as such. You had to know when to look.

I got up. I was better now. Just hungry, probably, and although I dutifully took my regular meals from my fridge and the Mansion Street canteen, six times out of ten I would sit staring at them until they went cold. I made my way into the foyer, and asked at the desk for Rowan Clyde.

The girl behind the cash register gave me an apprehensive onceover. I wondered if I'd forgotten to shave or to brush my hair. These details did sometimes pass me by these days, and in combination with my plainclothes apparel, probably gave me a disreputable air. One of the city's sinners rather than its law-enforcement saints... I showed the girl my badge, which made her look unhappier still. "What's wrong?" I asked her, as gently as I could. Bill had told me to be nice. "Isn't he here?"

"I... Yes, he is. Give me a second and I'll call him down for you."

Briefly I considered this. There was a phone on the desk, but it was far enough away that if she whispered to Rowan Clyde to leg it out the back rather than come down and meet nice DS Carr, I wouldn't be any the wiser. "It's okay," I said. "I'll go to him. Where does he work?"

"In the restoration rooms behind the glassware exhibition. Just up those stairs and through there."

Wherever I went in public these days, it always seemed to be *just up those stairs*. There was a lift to the upper floors, but I had to be able to manage one flight without becoming an exhibition myself. The physiotherapy ogre made me do that and worse every time he clapped eyes on me. I nodded my thanks and walked away briskly—took a brisk, casual jog at the steps. And yes, I managed fine. But in my head I scratched out Bill Hodges' review date for my police-driving capabilities—the decision to lose the painkillers had been mine, not my doctor's, and I had just fucking well changed my mind. Oh God, yes. There wasn't enough aspirin in the world, and if I gritted my teeth harder my fucking jaws would break. Briskly, casually, I got to the top and kept walking.

The doors to the restoration rooms lay at the far end of the gallery. Normally I'd have taken a glance en route at the outrageous collection of Victorian glass monstrosities shimmering in their cabinets—they were

Lily's delight, and it would take an eight year old to love them—and the stark modern portrait works beyond them. Today, though, focus was essential, and I blinked the red mist and tears from my eyes and made out the lettering over the doors—*Staff only. No public access*. That was just too bad. I might have tumbled out of special-ops heaven but I wasn't a member of the public, a punter, an ordinary Joe on the street, not yet. The doors weren't locked. They opened in dignified silence when I pushed, and fell back discreetly on their air-cushioned hinges when I let go.

The room was dark. For a moment I thought the girl downstairs had decided to make that call, in which case she'd better have vanished too. Then my eyes adjusted, and I saw a young man at the gallery's furthest reach, standing by a frame-propped canvas in a pool of light.

I didn't announce myself. You could sometimes learn more from a witness in the ten unguarded seconds before they knew you were there than in hours spent with them afterwards. Out of habit, I began to make my observations. The first thing I saw was that the surveillance picture hadn't been that good after all. Maybe Rowan Clyde was nothing special in the street, but here, intent upon his work, he sent a strange pang through me. I'd only experienced anything like it when scaling Scafell Pike in the Lakes—my little glass mountain—and I'd reached the top, and turned to look back the way I'd come, and I'd understood that I would never see the world this way again, never again quite like this, rich with sunlight and stitched together by the shadow of ravens' wings. I couldn't work out the connection. He was just a man in his mid-twenties, a nicely cut profile against bright light, lips pursed in concentration.

He was also just a job. I pushed my reaction aside. I glanced at the long bench beside him, from which he was now rapidly selecting delicate brushes and tools. At his other elbow was a huge ceramic palette, daubed in every colour imaginable. I couldn't make out the subject on the canvas in front of him, but as I watched, he drew one tiny brush-head half an inch across it, and a wound I hadn't realised was there healed itself, a broken line reconnected. I tried not to be impressed. That had to be finicky work. Better than safe-cracking or picking pockets, but not much use in the grand scheme of things. Men like him annoyed me on principle. Fully grown, but locked away in ivory towers doing jobs better suited to graduate students. Hiding away from the world. No matter how talented he was, I doubted the

work paid much, and I filled in his background with some neat brushwork of my own—wealthy, indulgent parents, paying for his training and probably still supporting him now. Few worries, and still fewer principles, if he wasn't prepared to come forward as witness to one of the city's most savage killings in decades. An effete dilettante, too dreamy to notice a bloody great policeman walking up behind him...

No. After that one stroke of the brush, he had gone still. His expression didn't change. All I could see of him was that beautiful profile, limned in light, but he was watching me. All right. Game over. I stopped a few yards short of him. "Rowan Clyde?"

He exploded into movement. The easel and his palette went flying. In five years of chasing villains round the city streets I'd never seen anyone shift so fast—he was on the far side of the room before I could draw breath, shouldering open a fire exit. The door slammed behind him and he was gone.

I raised my eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, for fuck's sake," I whispered. This must be a nice peaceful place to work. I could hear pigeons and doves prooking about in the roofspace. There were rain-smeared skylights, seagulls wheeling above them. I could let this go—pull out the stool from under the bench and sit down. My back was killing me already, and I didn't stand a chance—Clyde would know every corridor and broom closet.

But I was here on a last-chance assignment from my boss. Bill hadn't put it to me that way, but I knew. If I screwed up a simple witness interview, how long could I expect to keep my fragile foothold at Mansion Street? As for *alternatives*—my arse. I was a one-trick pony, a round peg hammered so tight into its round hole that I'd never fit properly anywhere else again. And last time I'd looked, I'd still been a copper.

So I ran. I tossed aside the ogre's warnings about caution and starting from cold, and I just took off the way I had used to, full throttle. I shoved the fire door open and pelted down the corridor beyond it. No doors, no turnings. My quarry had to be here somewhere, and he hadn't got that much of a head start. I dashed down twenty yards or so of lino-covered floor, and for all but one of them I managed to outrun my damage and pain. On the twentieth, I had to slow to make a corner, and there it all caught up with me. I crashed to a halt, clutching at the wall, fingers scrabbling. Christ, it was like being stabbed—no, worse; I'd taken a knife during a pub fight and not



been as royally fucked up as this. I doubled over, bracing one hand on my knee. It had been for nothing, too. I'd run into a storage unit, a bloody dead end. Clyde must have peeled off through a door I hadn't seen. I'd lost him.

Well, at least I was alone. That was a blessing—alone, I could unleash the pain and frustration in a brief explosive roar. “Ah, fuck it! Fuck!”

“Who the hell are you?”

I jolted upright. My balance was screwed and I fell back against the wall in my effort to spin round. My hand flailed for a weapon I hadn't carried in six months. “Police officer,” I managed. “You—Rowan Clyde—stay right where you are.” That wouldn't work, though—I couldn't see the bastard. “On second thoughts, step out and show yourself. Slowly.”

A set of tall cabinets had cast a deep shadow. After a moment, a random patchwork of light and shade stirred and became a human shape. Clyde emerged, as slowly as I could have wished. He was sheet white, and one side of his face—the profile I hadn't seen—was a mass of bruising. Not quite the pussy I'd taken him for—plainly he was terrified, but his spine was straight, the set of his shoulders defiant. “You're from the police?”

“Yeah. Who did you think?”

“I don't know. You don't look like a cop. Show me your ID.”

Swallowing hard, trying to get hold of my breath, I pulled out my badge. I held it at arm's length for him. Maybe I needed to clean up my act a bit. A plain-clothes brief didn't extend to resembling a thug. Maybe I needed a more reassuring, employable face to show to the public. “All right,” I said. “I'm sorry I scared you. Are you okay?”

Clyde took a good look at my badge, then a better one at me. After a moment he nodded. “Yes. *I'm* all right.”

“Well, I am too. So can we go back to your workroom and start over?”

I let him lead the way. That gave me the whole length of the corridor to grimace and limp and wipe the cold sweat off my brow. By the time we reached the gallery I had everything more or less under control again. I could even envy Clyde the easy grace with which he hitched himself onto the draughtsman's stool. He was too thin, but nicely built, more on the lines of a dancer than an academic. He gestured at another stool nearby, but that was a chance I couldn't take. Instead I assumed what I hoped was an official-looking posture, propping myself discreetly against the wall. “So,” I began. “Who did that to you?”

“No idea. But it happened the day after your guys started tagging me around, so I’d guess it’s connected to what happened in my building the other night, and the crack baron who got pulled in for it.” A faint smile flickered, poignant against the bruising. “Any chance you can call off your dogs?”

“The baron was called Goran Maric. What do you know about him?”

“Just what I saw on the news.”

“And you think this happened to you...”

“Because I had two great big flat-footed bobbies making me conspicuous, yes. And it hurts, so I’d really appreciate being left alone.”

“Have you had it seen to?”

“No. The guys who did it said the fewer people I talked to, the less likely I was to end up in the Tyne with a concrete block tied round my neck.” That was probably why the kid on reception—his girlfriend?—had looked so scared. “I know what you’ve come to ask me, Detective Sergeant Carr. And the answer’s no.”

“It’s Vincent.”

“What?”

“Vincent, not DS Carr. Vince.”

He had dark, finely marked brows. One of them lifted a bit. “You can call me Rowan. It’s still no.”

“Can I have a look at your face? I take your point about the concrete block, but you’re already talking to me.”

“So things couldn’t get any worse?”

Something in the dry little query almost made me laugh. “You might have a cracked cheekbone, a fractured skull. Let’s see.”

He sat impassively under my brief examination. I kept it arm’s length, impersonal. His skin was warm against my chilly fingertips but I set that observation aside, pressing gently at the edge of his eye socket, the corner of his jaw where the bruising was worst. “Okay. Nothing broken. Get yourself some arnica. Why did they only mark you up on one side?”

“Oh, I’m sure they would’ve done both. That was the bit they were thumping off the wall when a car came up the alley, that’s all.”

“I wasn’t accusing them of inefficiency.” I stepped back from him. So far—more or less—I’d been the friendly, sympathetic cop, tried my clumsy

public-relations trick of offering him my first name, not that he'd fallen for that. "You reckon they were warning you off?"

"What else? I wasn't mugged. They left me my wallet with fifty quid cash in it."

"But they were wasting their time. Because you live up on the top floor of Half Moon Chambers, and you didn't see a thing."

For the first time, his wary gaze flickered. He noticed the mess on the floor, and I didn't stop him when he bent to pick up the canvas. I almost asked if it was damaged, but I was bad cop now, who wouldn't care.

"That's right. Nothing."

"And you were nowhere near the crime scene that night?"

He righted the easel and set the canvas back on it. He was a decent professional, I had to admit, assessing the piece even while his fists clenched with nerves. "No. Nowhere near."

"Then why did Maric's thugs target you? How would they even know?"

He swung to face me. I tensed a little—maybe I'd misread that clench of the hands. "I've seen you around here before, haven't I? With your kids."

It was harsh, sudden, almost a demand. I thought about giving him some awful old line—*I'll ask the questions around here, sonny*—but even as bad cop, I didn't want to alienate him. If I gave a bit, maybe he would. "Not my kids. My sister's. But yeah, we come here a lot."

"And your other half. The northeast's answer to Brad Pitt."

That was far enough. I didn't have an *other half*. I never had, even when Jack Monroe had still been with me, large as life and twice as dangerous. Men with other halves were screwed, if the other half detached itself and left. Were half-men. "Mr Clyde, this will be quicker for both of us if you could just answer my questions."

"Not *Rowan* now, then." He was picking up his scattered brushes and I couldn't see his face, but there had been the faintest edge of teasing in his tone, as if I were a man who could be laughed at, played with. Well, I had been. Not any more.

"No, not any more. Listen to me. Two weeks ago, someone broke into a basement flat in your building. There were two Chinese students living there. They were mixed up to their arses in this city's crack trade, but they didn't deserve to be shot. They were nineteen. One was a girl. Look me in

the face right now and tell me you didn't see anything, and I'll piss off and leave you alone.”

He obeyed as far as the look. Again I felt that weird pang. I wished for an instant that we hadn't met on the battlefield—that I might have bumped into him in a club, bought him a drink and maybe encountered that look in the alley outside. Half-yielding, half-protesting. Hot and full of promise. “I got beaten up,” he said slowly, “because some of your lot decided I knew something. They went after me, and Maric's heavies smelled blood in the water.”

“But my lot were wrong? You're not a witness in this case?”

For a moment I thought he would break. Find his balls or his spine, deliver on the promise in his eyes. We both stood and listened to the pigeons and the seagulls for a while. Then he turned away from me. “No.”

I gave it up. We had the witnesses we needed. I wasn't sure why I'd even pushed it this far. “All right,” I said. “Goran Maric's in custody, but let's leave his army roaming around on the loose, making examples of teenage kids and selling crack outside school yards. I don't believe you, Mr Clyde, but you're not worth any more of my time.” I took a card out of my coat's inner pocket. “If by any chance you decide to grow a pair and have another crack at this bastard, call me. You'll be given protection.” I dropped the card into the middle of his rainbow-daubed palette. He didn't move to take it. When I reached the gallery doors he was standing just where I had found him, motionless, his undamaged profile picked out in light.

## Chapter Four

The ogre had said that if I allowed myself to limp, I would damage muscles on the other side of my spine. I should keep using the aluminium stick until the weakness had passed. Since I'd left the stick twenty floors up in a tower block, the weakness wasn't really an option, and I left the gallery foyer with my head high and as steady a gait as I could manage. The girl on reception darted out from behind her desk as soon as I was through the glass doors, and disappeared in the direction of the restoration rooms. Rowan Clyde hadn't struck me as the girlfriend type, but you never could tell.

My route home was a three-minute walk through the twilight zone. Rowan's gallery and my flat lay on opposite sides of an abyss of redevelopment that had cracked the city apart in the 1970s. If I looked behind me to the Langring—which I couldn't, not unless I wanted to fall face-down into the gutter—I would see Edwardian England, baroque civic architecture at its finest, octagonal cupola and a frieze of Grecian ladies dancing beneath. Ahead of me was my own tower block, the only residential one in the city. It soared up through eighty metres of concrete and steel, bisecting the tender night sky. Some called it Bauhaus, others Brutalist. For myself, I had found it exciting to move into a flat poised high above the city where I'd struggled in the dirt for so long. I'd paid my first month's rent with my first police pay packet, and the two things were bound tight to one another in my mind—an upward leap, a chance to see the world as the ravens saw it on Scafell Pike.

It had taken me a while to notice—weirdly, because it was so obvious—that my citadel was built on thin air. A four-lane road ran right beneath it. The block was lodged on vast concrete piers that protruded out over the entrance, blocking daylight and attracting drunks and deadbeats. Once I'd moved in, I'd learned other things about it—that its planner and architect had ended up in prison for grand-scale corruption in forcing development permissions through, that it would have been demolished years ago if not for the forest of radio and cellphone transmitters that had sprung up on its roof, the highest point for miles around. I hadn't minded. Its hollow base had struck me more as a wonder than a threat, and anyway I was scarcely

ever there. I'd used its forty flights of stairs as a training run. Sometimes I even climbed them now. No matter how grim a mood I was in when I got home, by the time I'd dragged myself up to my own front door, I would be in so much pain that everything else would drop away from me. Admin tasks, interviews, a life that revolved around paperclips instead of guns and swift-footed justice—my mind would go blank on the lot, and often I could knock back my pills with a tumbler of scotch and hit my bed unconscious.

No chance of that today. I'd overdone it spectacularly chasing bloody Rowan Clyde, and would have to take the steel coffin of a lift, which always smelled of cat pee despite my conviction that no self-respecting cat would come near the place. I'd be lucky if I made it that far. I stumbled on the steps beneath the forbidding monster pier, and I wondered if this was it, if I'd dislodged the bullet and was about to collapse like overcooked pasta right here, numb from the waist down forever. No—I took another step and then another, and then a dozen more, and I hit the button for the lift and nothing happened.

Nothing at all.

“Shit,” I told the tight-closed doors in front of me, pressing my palms and my brow onto their smug unyielding steel. “Fuck. Shit. Fuck.”

“Vincent!”

I jerked my head up. One other person did call me that—Mrs Dixon, my neighbour from the second floor, resplendent in blue rinse and floral raincoat. Four flights of stairs could inconvenience her as badly as my forty, and I'd carried her groceries up a dozen times when the lift was out of order. I could have carried *her*. “Sorry, Mrs Dixon.”

“Is that thing not working again? It's a blessed nuisance—but such language, dear!”

“Yes. I didn't know you were there.”

“Well, it'll be the end of me, and then I shall sue them,” she informed me cryptically. “Where there's a blame there's a claim, you know. I shall have to go to Elsie's for my tea.”

“All right. Your purse is right on top of your bag, Mrs D.”

She peered into her Co-op grocery bag and poked the purse further down. “So it is. You're a good boy, Vincent.”

She turned and waddled off. She expected the door to be opened for her, so I went and did it. I followed her through, then sank down onto the top

step beside one of the regular drunks, who saluted me kindly enough with a paper-bagged bottle.

I almost envied him. He, presumably, had reached the end of his fall. Pathetically, I envied Mrs Dixon and her tea at Elsie's. No sleet would be falling in Elsie's living room. I thought about getting up and going back inside, but there was nowhere to sit.

This was a new low for me. Of course it wasn't rock bottom. Unlike my neighbour tramp, I had a phone in my pocket, friends who would come and help me. *Officer in distress...* Bill Hodges would send out a car. Nevertheless, just for now, I was trapped on the steps of my own building, unable to go further or go home. I propped my elbows on my knees, let my brow rest in my hands. I would get my head up, sort this situation out, in just a minute. The sleet began a cold-footed dance on the back of my neck.

"DS Carr?"

I jumped so hard I made the tramp jump too. Rowan Clyde was standing over me, the collar of his jacket turned up, his hands in his pockets. His hair was longer than the fortnight-old surveillance shot had shown, and the wind was blowing damp strands of it over his brow. His eyes were a rich agate brown, somehow catching warm gold lights in the bitter dusk. Half a dozen stupid ideas occurred to me, and one fell out of my mouth. "Did you follow me?"

Again, a lift of one dark eyebrow. A look that said plainer than words, *don't flatter yourself*. "No. This is my route home." He took one step back and looked up at the sheer concrete cliff above us. I watched him, hope stirring in spite of myself. Maybe he'd changed his mind about helping me out. Maybe I'd have something decent to take back to Bill after all.

"I've got a mate who lives in there. He says the lift never works."

"It works sometimes."

"Not today, though."

"Er... no. Not today."

A silence fell, more awkward somehow than the ones that had punctuated my clumsy interrogation in the gallery. The tramp cracked it for us, waving his bottle again to greet the new arrival. "Bonny lad," he declared, then looked closer. "One half, anyway. Other half looks like fookin' mincemeat." He tipped his head back and loosed a cackle of delight at his own wit.

“Sorry,” I said, calmly as I could. “You haven't been introduced. This is the rat-arsed guy who lives on my steps, and I won't bother telling him your name because I tell him mine every time I see him, and it doesn't make any difference. Does it?”

“Aye, our Vernon. That's right.”

Rowan nodded. He didn't seem fazed by the mincemeat gag. He looked tougher in daylight than he had beneath the gallery's lamps, and as if he might have been called worse. He extended a hand to me. I took it on reflex, only realising then the clammy chill of my own. As soon as I was on my feet, I let him go. I wasn't even sure why he'd thought I needed his help.

“Were you on your way in?”

“Er, yeah. But...”

“Come on, then. This is turning to snow.”

So it was. I put a pound coin into the tramp's grubby outstretched palm—he seemed to expect it, and it was one less bit of shrapnel to lug up those bloody stairs. And of course he was nowhere near having reached the end of his fall, not on a night like this. He and I both could go infinitely further down. Rowan was holding the door for me. I got past him awkwardly, and we stood in the hallway's grey shadows. It was a place where the wind seemed to moan even on a calm day. It was dank and grim. I'd never noticed. Who cared? It was like a railway platform or a bus depot, a means of getting somewhere else.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” *Why wouldn't I be*, I wanted to demand. But there I was, standing beached and lost between the worlds, arms folded over my chest to hold back shivers. “I'm fine.”

“I'll try the lift again.” He pushed buttons, listened for a moment to the unresponsive silence behind the doors. “No. Sorry, nothing.”

“That's okay. I often walk it.”

“When you can.”

I opened my mouth. I'd done a good camouflage job at the gallery. Yes, he'd seen me doubled up and swearing for a moment, but that could simply have been my frustration at having to chase his sorry arse through the corridors. I'd pulled it together after that.

“All right,” he said, cutting across the beginning of my protest. He came to stand in front of me. “You don't look the forthcoming type, so I'm going



to hazard a guess. You've been injured—on duty, I should think—and you're not better yet. Not supposed to run around. Let me give you a hand up the stairs.”

“Thanks, but I live on the twentieth floor. I'm not your problem.”

“Then is there somebody else you can call? Where's Brad Pitt?”

“In Los Angeles where he belongs. Seriously, I'll manage. Go home.”

I must have misheard his reply. I thought I'd caught the words *a beautiful smile*, but he'd been turning away from me to glance into the stairwell, and it was no more than a whisper. He didn't look the type for compliments. “Look,” he said. “It's my fault that you had to run. Come on—just a few flights, then I'll feel like we're quits.”

Even one flight turned out to be almost impossible. I took hold of the rail with my right hand, and I put my left arm round his shoulders when he told me to. That would have hurt with Brad Pitt, who was a good two inches taller, but Rowan was my own height. A comfortable reach. He wrapped an arm round my waist, and somehow the feel of his palm closing on the base of my ribcage made my eyes prickle with tears, as if I hadn't been touched in months. As if that part of me had been made to fit there. The hem of my sweater rode up as he adjusted his grip, and the direct contact made it even worse. I had no idea why I was so painfully aware of him...

Except that I hadn't been touched in months, had I, outside of the most impersonal medical care. I bit my lip and concentrated on taking one stair at a time, but it didn't do me any good. He was much stronger than I would have guessed from his build. He took hold of the wrist I had draped over his shoulder. Between that and the arm round my waist I felt secured, anchored to him. He put a powerful heft behind each effort I made for myself, and in this way we managed the second flight, the third and the fourth. He began to warm up with the exercise and I felt his heat like a wing extended round me, and that was a pure pleasure, but the change in his scent—tiny, almost subliminal—drove sudden impure visions into my head. Jack had proved to me forcibly that I was still alive down there. Since then, though, what with pain, drugs, and what I could now admit was a good case of crushing depression, the beast had gone back to its cave.

Its restlessness now was pure reflex. Any human contact would have done it. Certainly I didn't fancy this skinny lad hauling me upstairs now. It

was just awkward, and I hoped the rising tide of tension was one-sided, palpable only to me.

He shot me a dark sidelong glance, and I knew that it wasn't. "Are you okay? Do you need a break?"

I did, but I couldn't afford one. If I stopped, I wouldn't start again. I shook my head and ploughed on, my grip slipping with cold sweat on the banister. The rhythm of his body against mine was hypnotic. He moved with a compact resilience that told me he could do this for as long as I needed him to. He wasn't even breathing hard...

We reached the next landing, and I was almost grateful for the sudden wash of cold sickness that took me, killing the nascent arousal stone dead. This was what happened when I pushed it too far. I should have taken the break. I halted, shuddering. Maybe I could get rid of him before worst came to worst. "Let me go. I'll be all right from here."

"We're not even quarter way. Let me help you a few more flights."

I detached myself from him. It was hard—I didn't want to unwrap his warm arm. I stumbled away, as far into a corner as I could get. "Sorry. Stay back."

Usefully, it had been one of the days for staring at food, not eating it. All I could do was cough and choke until my eyes streamed. I was distantly relieved—Bauhaus or Brutalist, it didn't look better with puke on it, not that my fellow occupants seemed to share that view on a Saturday night. Rowan took a step toward me and I gestured him back. He folded his arms and waited patiently, and a few moments later through a roar of static I heard the thunk of the lift in its shaft. I straightened up. Rowan held out a tissue for me, and I took it shakily. "Oh, thank God for that."

"Is that the lift starting up?"

"Sounds like it. Press the button, will you?"

I went to stand beside him. I had the pain-induced gagging more or less under control but the concrete walls were waltzing round me, and all I wanted was a locked door behind me and oblivion. After an alarming squeal of metal cables, the lift doors pinged and opened. "Thanks," I said roughly. "You've been really good. But I can manage now."

"I'd be happier if I saw you to your door."

I didn't have the strength to argue. Our silence in the lift's confined space should have been awkward, but I was too busy holding faintness at

bay, and avoiding my own gaze and his in the shadowy, cracked mirror. The lift deposited us right outside my flat—its constant rattle had been one of the reasons I'd got the place so cheap—and I dug in my pocket for my keys. When I looked up, Rowan, good as his word, was turning away. He gave me a quick smile over his shoulder. "Think I'll take the stairs," he said. "Don't fancy trusting my luck to that metal coffin again. Look after yourself, okay? I'm sorry I couldn't help you—about Goran Maric, I mean."

I was being rude. Social graces weren't high on my agenda at the moment, but he'd gone to a lot of trouble for me. God knew what I must have looked like, slumped on the steps outside with my resident tramp. He could have just walked by. "Hang on a second. Do you want a cup of tea or something?"

It sounded so ridiculous, a line from a bad porn film. He hesitated at the top of the stairs, that uncertain smile of his lingering. "I'm okay. I'd better get going."

I didn't wonder at his refusal. I'd been more or less unpleasant to him since the first second we'd met. No wonder I wasn't Bill Hodges' first choice for public relations. "Look," I said, "I'm not the guy they normally send out to do interviews, okay? I'm sorry I told you to grow a pair."

The smile became definite, a bit sardonic, very charming. "It's all right. You're meant to say things like that, aren't you? To get people to talk."

"No, we're really not. You've been watching too much TV."

I went inside, leaving the door open behind me. Weariness was pulling at me, and I didn't really care, in its cold grip, whether he followed me or not. I tried to remember what I'd used to do when people still visited me—Jack, of course, my sister, even Phil when he wanted money or a bail-out. The kettle would be a good start.

"Wow," Rowan said softly behind me. "This is... bleak."

I paused in the kitchen doorway. It wasn't yet quite dark, and out of habit I hadn't switched on the overheads. I lived so far above the city that lingering daylight found me here even when night had fallen in the streets below. The flat occupied a corner site, so two sides were open to that lucid northern light, uniquely piercing even when grey and full of sleet. I'd had a clear-out in here at the same time as I'd tackled my desk at work. There had been too many things for me to fall over, too many boys' toys, like the electric guitar I'd always wanted but never learned to play. Now it was

really just me and the light. “I like it this way,” I said, then went to fill the kettle, annoyed with myself for having felt the need to defend my tastes even that far.

I made tea in two mugs, listening to the wet snow lash against the glass. If the weather worsened, soon the buildings below me would white out and I'd be isolated in my little cube of sky. The tower would sway on its moorings, tiny vertiginous shifts I'd been told were perfectly normal, the concrete flexing so it wouldn't break. I enjoyed both these prospects. I was now regretting my hospitable impulse, and I hoped my visitor would finish his tea fast and go, so I could sway in the blizzard and white out my own brain in pills and booze.

When I came back into the living room, he was looking at the one photo I had hung on to, a nice portrait of my sister Jane and her kids. He was smiling faintly at it, and I remembered suddenly that everyone did—that no-one could resist her sweet grin. “Is this your family?”

“Yeah, my sane sister. I've got a nutcase brother somewhere too, although...” I shut up. My memories from my time in hospital were patchy, and sometimes I got them the wrong way round. First Phil had gone missing, and *then* Chrissy had come and told me about the Tyne, and the fish-eaten remains. He wasn't somewhere out there. No longer missing at all.

I bent to put the mugs on a coffee table by the sofa. It was a perfectly ordinary move and I couldn't understand what had gone wrong with it—I missed by inches and fell to my knees, thudding down into the spilled tea. “Ow. Fuck!”

Rowan darted over. He prised away the mug I was still clutching. “What is it?”

“Just get me...” A howl of pain was clambering up my throat. Swallowing, I gestured frantically in the direction of the shelf where I'd left my painkillers and the anaesthetic scotch. “Those. Please.”

“Okay.” He ran to get them. He handed me the pills, managing the childproof top far more deftly than I ever did. “These what you need?”

“Yeah. And...”

He glanced assessingly at me, then at the bottle. “And this is what you don't. I'll get you some water.”

I couldn't believe his bloody nerve. He'd put the scotch on the far end of the table, well out of my reach. Before I could think of what to call him he was back, pressing a glass of water into my hands. "Just try it this way this time," he said. "Look, what does it matter? I'll be going in a minute, then you can get pissed if you want."

That was true enough. I just had to hold out till the bastard left. I knocked a double dose of the painkillers back with the water. "Not gonna take the... bottle away with you?"

He snorted. "From a grown man? A copper in his mid-thirties? You only get that kind of service in rehab, DS Carr."

"Vince," I said automatically, not knowing why. I didn't want intimacy—I wanted him gone. I was losing it. A grown man, as he said, on his knees in a pool of cooling tea, unable to get up... Thank God the flooring was only cheap laminate. I'd used to have nice rugs, but after I'd tripped on one and had to call a bloody ambulance, they had gone too. Something else he'd said struck me. "I... I'm twenty nine."

He gave a grunt that could have been sympathy or amusement. "Sorry. Rough paper round, was it? Come on, let's get you up."

"Just help me to the sofa. I'll be fine."

"Your bed would be better. Er... you *have* a bed, right?"

I did. It had been the scene of what I now looked back on as quite fantastically athletic sex. I had used to be able to hoist Jack up almost vertically when he put his legs over my shoulders for that kind of fuck. I'd thought nothing of it. It had simply been my young man's birthright of unreflecting strength. I stifled a groan as Rowan half-lifted me onto my feet. "Yes. It's through here."

He deposited me carefully on the edge of the bed. I saw his downward glance and forestalled him, kicking off my shoes. He gave my shoulder a little push, as if I didn't know the routine, and I subsided, losing a breath of relief at being horizontal. The drugs were beginning to kick in, the edges of the pain dissolving in white mist. "Thanks," I said hoarsely. "Make yourself some tea, will you? Then please... Then just go."

"Your jeans are wet. Do you want me to—"

I coughed on unexpected laughter. "What? No, stupid. It's fine."

"What happened to you, Vince?"

“Nothing. Just an accident at work.” I closed my eyes. If he would let me be, I stood a chance, although I never slept for long. More likely I'd surface, twitching convulsively, visions of a glittering river and my brother's face and Jack's retreating back fighting for control of my nightmares. I was drifting now, though. I wasn't even cold any more, and I realised the duvet had been folded over me, the half I wasn't lying on tucked kindly round me. Still, it was stupid of me to fall asleep with a total stranger in my flat. I'd delivered a safe-living course at the YMCA about that kind of thing, another of Bill Hodges' make-work exercises for me. *Don't let a stranger mix your drinks. No condom? No way.* I chuckled, rolling onto my side. The kids' faces were crystal clear to me now, as they'd stared in disbelief at Mansion Street's least convincing outreach worker. Probably I'd wake to find my identity stolen. That actually sounded great to me right now. *Take it, Rowan, please. You're more than welcome.*

## Chapter Five

**B**ill Hodges was away for the next three days. When he appeared by my table in the canteen, I thought his first task upon his return must have been to look at my interview notes on Rowan Clyde. They didn't make for impressive reading. I gestured to him to sit down with a chill in my gut. What kind of copper was I, if I couldn't get such a soft-target witness as Clyde to cooperate? He was only a curator at a gallery. I'd taken the wrong approach with him from the start. I'd told the story honestly in my notes, and Bill's face was serious enough to suggest I might have screwed up my final assignment at Mansion Street. "Got some bad news, Vince."

If he'd come to sack me, I might as well make it easy for him. He was pale, his grey eyes tired, cropped hair ruffled as if he'd been running his hands through it. "Right. Yes, sir. What is it?"

"A bit of a bloody disaster. Our two witnesses did a flit last night."

I set down my coffee. "In the Maric case? The neighbours?"

"Yeah. They had Northern Cypriot connections, and it looks like they used them. They got on a flight for Nicosia late last night."

"Shit. Can we get them back?"

"Yeah, after a couple of years and a legal battle. There's no extradition treaty."

"Without those two, won't we be lucky to take this to trial at all?"

Bill picked up my polystyrene coffee cup and distractedly drank from it. He pulled a face at the sugar. "Oh. Sorry, Vince. Yeah, I've just had Chief Inspector Walsh on the phone asking me the same thing. I saw your report on Rowan Clyde. On a scale of one to ten, how determined was he not to help us out?"

"If ten's an outright no—I'd say about twenty. He's scared shitless. Maybe with reason. But I didn't help much, sir."

"Trouble is, without his testimony, Maric will probably walk. You're convinced he did see something?"

"Yeah. He's good at clamming up, but not much of a liar."

"Do you think taking another crack at him might help?"

"What—me? Are you kidding?"

“The uniform boys I sent after him didn't get near him at all. At least he talked to you, after a fashion.”

*What happened to you, Vince?*

Of course my interview notes had terminated with my exit from the gallery. Everything after that was oddly dreamlike in my memory. I'd slept from the moment my head hit the pillow until six o'clock the next morning, a record for me even before the shooting. I'd woken to find the flat peaceful and orderly, the tea stains mopped up from the floor, the mugs washed and dried. I had to struggle for recall of everything between the steps outside my flat and my stiff, zoned-out waking, but I did remember that question of Rowan's—the sudden unguarded kindness in it, and his first use of my name. “I'll go and see him again if you like. He's frightened, though, and I don't blame him. If Maric's lads did beat him up, they gave him a good working over.”

“As our sole remaining witness, he'd be looked after. I'd recommend to Walsh that we take him into protective custody. You could tell him that.” Bill looked up at me. He was a philosophical soul as a rule, holding to the win-some, lose-some attitude that a good senior officer needed to keep himself sane. He was shadowed with anxiety now. “We need to keep Maric locked away, Vince. If we can't, a hundred others just like him will spring up around this town. Our powers of enforcement are being eroded all the time—and apart from any of that, I'd hate to see the bastard who shot down one of my best men walking around free on the streets.”

It took me a moment to realise he meant me. “Okay,” I said awkwardly, not wanting him to see how I'd been touched. “I'll try again.”

“Good lad. I tell you what, though—wait till tonight, and see if you can catch him at home. I had a little note—very civil, mind—from the Langring's director. I think you might have trodden a bit of an Old Master into his parquet floor.”

\* \* \*

Half Moon Chambers. I wasn't sure who'd built it, or decided to decorate its wrought-iron balconies with plaques depicting enigmatic crescent moons. Commercial rather than private, I thought, and clearly the Edwardians had entertained different, more decorative ideas when it came



to business premises than we did today. The building had shadowed the Bigg Market for over a century now, a rococo ship in full sail, indifferent to the raucous life below, the daytime stalls and the rowdy nightclubs. I'd never been inside, though the fantastical Art Nouveau exterior had often caught my eye, and I entered carefully now, automatically keeping off towards the edge of the steps so as not to block the path of anyone better equipped than I was to get up or down them in a hurry.

Beyond the columns and fanlights, the inside of the place was shabby and decayed. Some of its original beauties were intact – that lift, for instance, which I was pretty certain never broke down. It didn't even look as though it ran on electricity—a team of dray horses patiently turning a treadmill up on the roof, maybe. It was a big cage with wrought-iron doors. I stopped to admire them for a moment. Heavy black orchids flourished around their bars, and a startling display of blue and green tiles ran up and over the hallway's arched ceiling. After that, it was a bit of disappointment to find a 1950s drab cement floor underfoot, but I knew that many of the flats were let out to students and starving artists, a shifting population that didn't attract big restoration grants. The Chinese kids who'd lived in the basement had been typical. Demi-monde people, disengaged from society, conducting their affairs—illegal and otherwise—quietly enough, until one of them had crossed one of Goran Maric's invisible lines, and unleashed all hell behind the enigmatic crescent moons that decorated the building's façade.

I took up a casual position at the top of the stairs that led down to the basement. One aspect of police work I had always been good at—maybe better now than ever—was going unnoticed, and I just wanted to let the early evening foot traffic pass by me in the corridor, and see what could be seen from here. Yes—there was a line of sight down to flat 12. Police tape now marked off the door, but if that door had been open, anyone crossing this part of the hall would have been able to see straight through the doorway. I glanced at the lift, and the angle from it to the main doors. You couldn't really avoid looking down at any commotion in number 12, if you lived upstairs and happened to be entering or leaving the building. No special effort would be needed. I was a pretty good judge of character, and I didn't buy Rowan's denial of seeing anything at all. He'd held my eyes with steady defiance till I'd asked him the question outright. And paranoid and

tightly strung as he was, there'd been something more there than nerves once he'd committed himself to the lie.

I made one last check of the lobby to see that no-one was taking an undue interest in my presence there. The back of my neck had prickled a couple of times as I'd made my way down from Mansion Street, but I hadn't been able to see that I'd picked up a tail. I'd try to get Bill to offer Clyde some kind of protection anyway, even if he didn't talk for us—Maric's men had already taken one pop at him, and our two prime witnesses had been scared enough to run. I let myself into the huge cage lift, struggling a bit with the doors. This was better. If it jammed for any reason—if the horses up top went on strike—a man could walk around a bit, and even lie down in comfort until help came.

Upstairs I found myself in a blue-mosaiced maze. The building, foursquare from the outside, here on its top storey dissolved into curves and odd diagonals I couldn't make fit with its façade. The floors had escaped renovation this high up and there were black-and-white geometric fantasies beneath my feet as well as the swirls of turquoise tiling on the walls. I shook my head, blinking. This could drive you crazy after a while. My own building took bleak to a far extreme, but I could see how that style had sprung out of this, the desire for clean straight lines. Rowan's flat was number seventeen. On my left the odd-numbered doors were counting down in one direction, and on my right the evens were headed the other way. I followed the odds and found they stopped at fifteen, then picked up again at twenty one. Clearly the place had been designed by a lunatic... Retracing my steps, I saw a corridor off from the main hall, narrow and almost pitch dark. It was on the wrong side to lead to the missing flats, but I took it. I'd lost my bearings. This weirdly angled passageway must lead to one of the turrets, the rounded corner rooms under their domed, fish-scale tiled roofs. I'd thought those must be for decoration only. From outside they'd looked almost derelict, paint peeling from the window frames. Still, there in front of me, terminating the corridor, were two doors. Nineteen was numbered, the other just a forbidding dark-wood rectangle.

It didn't take a genius. I hesitated, then remembered I was a policeman in pursuit of a witness and gave it a solid thump. A heavy silence descended. All sounds from the street were muffled up here. There was a sense of unreality, of displacement from the world. This was Rowan Clyde's

hideaway. Suddenly I saw it as Rowan might. God knew who he thought had tracked him down in his lair. I leaned my hands on the door frame. "Rowan? It's Vince Carr."

The door opened straight away. The first thing to hit me was a rich smell of turpentine, and then the warmth. Rowan was standing in front of me, and to my surprise that uncertain smile was back. He was wearing an old, paint-stained shirt.

We stood for a moment in silence. If I was sizing him up, he was definitely doing the same to me. "Hi," I said. I needed a moment longer, a chance to get a feel for him. "I never thanked you. For hoisting my arse up all those stairs, I mean, and clearing up my flat."

It was a lame effort at a hedge, but he didn't seem to mind. He wiped his hands on a cloth and then extended one to me. "Hi. We didn't do this last time."

I took his proffered grip. "No, we didn't. That was my fault."

"If you give me a ring before you visit, I won't be so slow about answering the door."

"Okay." Bill Hodges had specifically told me not to do that, to try and take him by surprise. I'd enjoyed that idea. I'd used to like every weapon in my arsenal, from the guns to the psych techniques for rattling witnesses, wrong-footing them and getting round their guard. Rowan Clyde's bruises looked bad in the dim-lit hallway. Maybe it was the effect of my own injuries, but these days the tricks I'd learned lay heavy on me, like tools in a bag I was being forced to lug around. "I won't kid you it's a social call," I said. "I did want to thank you, but... there's something I need to talk to you about. Have you got a few minutes?"

"Yes, sure. Come in."

He closed the door behind me, and the warmth wrapped me round. "Crikey," I said awkwardly, following him down the hall. "I wouldn't fancy your heating bills. Are you growing marijuana in here?"

It was a poor joke in the circumstances, but he shot me a wry glance over his shoulder. "You'd be the last person I'd tell, wouldn't you? Take your coat off. I don't like the cold."

No. He didn't look as if he did. A proper little hothouse flower, I'd have labelled him, if this had been our first meeting and I hadn't encountered his strength. His shirt was tucked into soft, tight-fitting jeans that revealed his

fine-made dancer's hips. He had the rich ivory skin which sometimes goes with dark hair and eyes. I couldn't imagine him ever taking a tan. Then, I wasn't in love with the remorseless bitter winter that gripped my city from November to late March myself, and I was glad enough to shrug off my heavy coat. Rowan took it, grinned at my gesture of fanning myself. I hesitated, then stripped out of my sweater as well. "Ta," I said. "I don't normally rip half my kit off before starting an interview."

"I'm glad to hear it." He hung my coat, more carefully than it deserved, off a brass hook in the wall. "Is that what this is, then? Another interview?"

"I'm afraid so." I rubbed my arms. It was nice to feel the warm air on them, to be able to stand in a T-shirt on a winter's day, and that tang of turps kept the rooms from being stuffy. "Something's changed in the Maric case, and I wanted to..." I trailed off. We'd moved from the dark hall into the living room. We were in one of the turrets—sunset light was blazing in through one large casement window and two round ones set into a curving alcove. "Bloody *hell*, Rowan. Are these yours?"

"No. They were here when I moved in."

The walls were covered, floor to ceiling and up across the arching roof, with painted murals. The coverage was so bold and complete that at first I hadn't taken it in. Now, though, they almost knocked me off my feet—I took a step backward and steadied myself against a chair. The designs were huge, powerfully simple in form but so vividly coloured that they seemed to reach out to meet perception halfway—to be in a kind of arrested motion that renewed itself at every fresh glance. I let go a low whistle. "Incredible. He wasn't shy, was he—whoever did these?"

Rowan had gone to lean by the window. He was watching me curiously, as if interested in my reaction. "Do they offend you?"

I shook my head. The idea of being offended hadn't occurred. It had taken me a while to realise I was looking at vision after vision of men in erotic embrace. Their delineation was almost abstract, and yet when you got the idea of it, became almost shockingly real. Limb twined with golden-skinned limb. Strong hands clasped round muscular backsides. And all this was happening in a kind of paradise garden, or as part of it. A loving embrace became a vine. Upraised shafts sprang from velvety petals. Mouth met open mouth in a vertiginous swirl of foliage, night sky and stars. My eyes adjusted to the light, and I saw that the hallway I'd passed through was

also a wilderness of sensual plants and forms. “They make me think of Georgia O’Keefe, if she’d been a gay man, or Tamara de Lempicka.” I caught his glimmer of surprise. “What?” I asked defensively. “I’m a copper, so I’m not supposed to know my arts from my elbow?” The fact that I’d only acquired my cultural knowledge when the time had come for Jane’s kids to acquire theirs was none of his business. Their father had shipped out, and up until six months ago I’d tried to fill a bit of the gap, from football to trips round the galleries and help with projects for school.

“And are you?”

“Am I what?”

He shrugged. “Well, what you said about O’Keefe—and it’s not the stupidest comment I’ve ever heard... I wondered if you were seeing these as a gay man. From that perspective, I mean. I made my assumptions when I saw you with Brad Pitt, but maybe I was wrong.”

Did it matter to him? There was an odd undercurrent to his casual tone. I shrugged in my turn. “Brad and I might just have been friends. As it happens, though, he was my partner. Work type and lover type, before you ask.”

“Oh. And was that... Is that tough, in the police?”

“Not dramatically so.” Another passionate collision of flesh and muscle caught my eye and I answered him distractedly. “It’s still a bit *don’t ask, don’t tell*. We’re about five years behind London with that, same as with everything else.” I stopped myself. I couldn’t understand how he’d got me talking even this much about my own life—I was there to interview him, not the other way round, and we were way off topic. I turned my back on the seductive paintings. “Sorry. I’d better get to business. Can we sit down for a minute?”

“Were you okay the other night, after I left you?”

“I was fine. I have to tell you about—”

“Would you like a coffee?”

“Rowan.”

He ran a paint-daubed hand over his hair, making it stand up in spikes, and glanced at me in sheepish acknowledgement. “Okay. Clumsy effort to put you off has failed. I do, however, have some great coffee perked. There’s no milk or sugar in the flat, so all I have to do is chuck it into mugs. And there’s no fire escape from the kitchen, I promise.”

I set myself not to smile. If I wasn't careful, there was a great deal I could find charming about Rowan Clyde. I wanted to ask if he shared my gay man's perspective on art, and not so I could discuss painting with him. "All right. Coffee would be good. And I couldn't chase you down a fire escape if you did decide to leg it, so I'll have to take that on trust."

He disappeared through a doorway over-arched by two embracing young gods, and I sat down at the table in the chair he'd indicated. Everything in this place was extraordinary. Where I had functional melamine, he had a large bench table that could have come from a junkyard or the British Museum. Its worn surface was a patchwork of different polished stones, some with fossils in them, nautilus shells and the little flowers I'd helped Lily discover were called crinoids. The four chairs around it were in four different styles, but all were painted with twisting vines and jungle blossoms, so similar in style to the murals that they had to be by the same hand. The oculi windows added to the offbeat, slightly under-sea effect. My flat left me exposed to the elements beyond the thinnest shell of concrete and glass, but in here I could lose myself, forget all about the noisy world in the streets below. It was Friday night, almost sundown. Soon the daytime city people would go home, passing on their way to their buses and trains the first wave of incoming party animals, the girls in their microskirts and the lads all tattoos and cropped T-shirts, alcopop running like antifreeze in their veins. I'd used to love the prickling change in the atmosphere. The beginning of a night shift, and trouble almost guaranteed to break out somewhere. Jack and I had thrived on it, waiting in our squad car for the call...

"Here you go."

I hid a startled flinch. The process of losing myself had already begun—I usually avoided mournful comparisons between that time and this. "Thanks," I said, taking the nice stoneware mug he handed me. A china one would have burned my fingers. I was indefinably relieved when he sat down opposite me, not close by my side. "This won't take long. I don't want to keep you from your work."

He glanced at the canvas propped up on the far wall. "Oh, that's not urgent. I'm on an apprenticeship programme with the Langring. They give me stuff out of their basement to work on at home—low-value pieces where

it doesn't matter too much if I screw up—and their senior curator gives me feedback, and lets me loose on the real thing once I've got it right.”

“Do you like it?”

“Well, it beats the call centres. The pay's barely enough to cover this place and the next stage of my training, but that's okay. I like cold beans, and they lose flavour once they're out of the tin.”

There went my preconception of the wealthy parents. I didn't usually get that kind of thing wrong. What was it about Rowan Clyde, that I couldn't reach past his smoke and mirrors? I was allowing the conversation to drift. With an effort I pulled back onto track. “Rowan, I have to ask you to reconsider standing witness in the Goran Maric case.”

Immediately he tensed. Social call or not, until now he'd seemed open, almost pleased to see me. “I've told you I didn't see anything. I'm not sure,” he said slowly, “which part of that you don't understand.”

“I understand what you've told me.” He'd been right about the coffee—it was excellent, and I felt almost guilty for enjoying its rich, nuanced flavour while I set about tying him to the rack. “Forgive me if haven't been convinced by it. I'm sorry our uniformed officers weren't more subtle about approaching you, but they'd had clear intel from our crime-scene guys that you were in the ground-floor hallway soon after the killings happened. I had a look around down there. If you cross the hall, you can hardly help but see into the basement.”

“Then why aren't you chasing the other twenty people who must have been through there that night?”

“We did. We had two good witnesses – the couple who lived next door. And we've interviewed pretty much everyone else in the building. You're the only one who ran away from us. No-one else attracted Goran Maric's thugs.”

“So?”

“So it's tough for me to believe you don't have anything to tell us at all.”

His dark gaze fixed squarely on mine. The gold lights were very apparent, and tonight they weren't friendly fires. “What the hell does it matter to you? If you've got the neighbours – ”

“We don't. Not any more. They took fright and they skipped the country, taking most of our case against Maric with them. If we can't find

other testimony, he'll walk. Do you understand?"

A low chuckle broke from him. It was genuine, but so bitter it made me catch my breath. "What I *understand* is... that the first two ducks you lined up on your fairground rifle range came to their senses and flew. And now you're trying for a third. You must think I'm off my bloody head."

"My DI's authorised me to offer you any level of protection you'll accept. Removal to a safe house, if you want. You're not a..." I cast around for the right words, and decided to use his. I could see why he'd chosen them. "A duck on the rifle range. I mean you wouldn't be expendable to us. Not – not to me."

I could have bitten my tongue off for the last part. That wasn't how a copper manoeuvred a witness, and I didn't know where it had come from. But his expression altered completely, as if those were the first words he'd heard. I couldn't read the change, and he didn't want me to. He got abruptly to his feet and went to stand with his back to me, staring at the circle of crimson light the dying sun had thrown in through the western oculus. I couldn't help but look too. The painted couple caught in its nimbus were ordinary, or as ordinary as these astounding creations could be. They seemed human, anyway. They were locked in a pose that could have been combat or love, face to face, muscles taut and straining. Rowan lowered his head. "Why particularly not to you?"

I could have pushed it. I saw an opening, a place where once I'd have shoved straight through. This man was lonely. He was scared, and even if he hated my guts, I could tell when another gay man fancied me. *Why not to me? Can't you tell?* I'd done much worse, used my charms far more shamelessly, on undercover ops.

I wasn't undercover now. I felt as if I had no damn cover left to me at all, and the idea of throwing him a half-seductive line like that made me feel sick. "Not to me particularly. My boss values witness safety, that's all. We'll look after you."

He didn't turn. When he spoke, his voice had hardened again. "That's touching. Meanwhile, my job goes to hell and I lose the tiny freelance income I've managed to scrape together."

"You'd be compensated. Come on. I haven't known you long, but I can tell you're decent. Do the right thing."

"You're pretty good at this, aren't you?"



“What?”

Now he did swing round to face me. I resisted an urge to stand up and meet his anger head on. There was something hot and lovely about it, as if it might knock me down, but never wound me by its meanness. “I’m decent. I deserve to be protected. You’re being good cop now, DS Carr, and like I say, you’re a pro. But I can see the join. If this doesn’t work, you go back to what a cowardly shit I am, right?”

“Oh, Jesus.” With anyone else, I’d almost have been flattered by that analysis. But I hadn’t been trying for good cop or anything else, not this time. “No. I’m just trying to keep a dangerous nutcase off the streets, and... I need your help. That’s all.”

“And the answer’s still no. I like you, Vince, despite all your routines, or you’d never have got in here tonight. So I will tell you something, though it’s not what you came to hear. Will you shut up and listen?”

He liked me? It shouldn’t have mattered, but it did. I’d left all sense of my own likeability down in the dust of the Sunderland wharfs. I nodded. “Okay.”

“These paintings are mine. I said they weren’t because... I can’t do anything like that any more. I’m a recovering addict, which is the polite new term for ex-junkie.”

My heart sank. I should have bloody known. If he was attracted to me, I had enough self-awareness left to admit to myself that it was mutual. And I’d meant it when I’d called him decent. Disappointment dragged at me. Nausea coiled in my gut. Would there ever be a time in my life when I wasn’t shadowed by drugs, users, all the fucking mess they brought with them? “Wait up,” I said harshly. “This isn’t my business. Don’t tell me.”

“You don’t get to pick and choose what you hear. I want to tell you why the answer’s no. I could paint as long I was using. I did everything in here—the walls, ceilings, those chairs—while I was high. And when I cleaned up, it all left me. That’s why I spend my days restoring other people’s art. It’s all I’ve got left.” He folded his arms over his chest. The energy of his confession seemed to drain from him, leaving him skinny and small. “You’re a copper. You know there’s no such thing as an *ex* or a *recovering* anything, not when it comes to heroin. I live on a knife-edge. There’s no way I could face a trial, even if I had seen anything that night.”

I got up. I despised addicts. That was one of the tenets of my life. I'd grown up with one, and he had so marred my existence that I'd had no difficulty carrying my hatred out of my home and into the streets of Newcastle. It had made my job a hell of a lot easier. No misplaced compassion ever stayed my hand. *Watch out for DS Carr. He's got no time for crackheads.* Yes—part of my legend, the myth I told to others and myself.

Rowan Clyde didn't look like a junkie. But that was one of the first mistakes a junior copper learned not to make. “All right,” I said tiredly. “Forget it. I tell you what, though – have a damn good think about your little job, and staying out of trouble, and all the rest of it. If our two prime witnesses were scared enough to run, how do you plan on staying safe? I don't see the price of a plane ticket stashed in any coffee jars around here.”

“I don't keep cash in the house. I don't keep anything that would tempt me.”

“Laudable, but you're missing the point. We can only protect you if you let us.”

I couldn't do any more. It was time for me to go. I turned away from the entrancing table with its wonderful painted-vine chairs, and I walked back through the compact pagan Sistine Chapel Rowan had created from the toxins in his blood. I took down my coat from its hook. I thought I could get out of here without another glance at the artwork or the man, and that would be for the best.

“Vince?”

I stopped. Stopping didn't mean I had to look back. But I did, irresistibly, unable to ignore the new urgent note in his voice. He had gone to stand by the sash window and was staring down into the street. “Vince, don't go.”

“I've got to. If you get any more hassle, or you feel like you're in danger, phone the station and they'll send someone round.”

“Please wait.” He pushed away from the sill and strode across the living room towards me. I braced up, combat instincts flaring, though there wasn't a trace of aggression about him—only that quiet strength which gave the lie to the story he'd just told. He picked up the jumper I'd left on the arm of the sofa. “You've forgotten this.”

“Oh. Yeah—thanks.”

I put out my hand, but he didn't let go. Instead he lifted the garment to his face. He inhaled briefly, then looked up and gave me his extraordinary smile. "I wish I could keep it. You smell great."

"God, Rowan..."

"I am clean now. I have been for a year." Suddenly, incredibly gently, he lifted the sweater and brushed it against my face. "I don't want you to leave."

My heart squeezed hard and began a painful, hot-cold acceleration. He smelled bloody gorgeous himself—coffee and turps and warm male. I believed him, about the sobriety. I'd had plenty of experience with lies. His gaze was dilated but lucid, and potently focused on me. I'd never been looked at that way in my whole life. I whispered, "Give me my jumper back, you nutcase."

He held it at arm's length, and he took a step away from me. "Come get it."

"Rowan, I mean it. This isn't funny." I put out a hand and he seized it—lifted it to his mouth. My reflex to snatch it away died at the warmth of his touch. My fist opened up like one of his damned painted flowers, and he pressed a kiss to my palm.

## Chapter Six

His bedroom was painted too, but in here the pace had slowed, the colours toned down to deep soft blues and tawny gold. Only half a dozen beautiful male forms were depicted here, and these were amorphous, blending with one another and the starlit beach where they lay, or fucked, or danced—I couldn't work out which it was, and I couldn't believe I was in here trying. “Rowan,” I said faintly, for about the tenth time. “This is a really bad idea.”

“Go in a while. Just stay with me first. Just...”

I closed my eyes. He still had hold of my jumper and my wrist. He had led me here—and it wasn't as if he'd given me no chance to escape, thrown me down onto his sofa: the flat's strange design meant I'd followed him helplessly down two dark lengths of corridor—and stopped me by the foot of the bed. With my eyes shut, I didn't have to know how close he was. The palm of my hand still held the vivid sense-memory of his kiss, the skin tingling. God only knew how it would be if...

His mouth brushed mine. My eyes flew open. It had been the lightest touch, and now he was standing looking at me as if the next move should be mine. He was right. Through the door, back the way I'd come and out into the streets, where the winter night would soon cool my ardour. “Stop it,” I whispered. “I can't. Even if I wanted to, you're a civilian, a potential witness, and—”

“No, I'm not. I just told you, I'm never gonna be your witness with Maric. And as for a civilian...” He paused, lower lip just caught between his teeth, and surveyed me from head to foot. “You're not exactly in uniform yourself, soldier.”

I shuddered. It wasn't from cold. My coat lay somewhere in the corridor where I'd let it fall, and I'd given up on the sweater. He'd just have to keep it, if that was his whim. I was down to my T-shirt and jeans, and neither of those was camouflage enough. I didn't dare glance down, but my nipples were achingly taut, and the more I thought about not getting hard, the more my blood beat downward, my racing pulse helping lift the flag. “Oh, no.”

He shook his head, frowning in mock pity. “Sorry. Looks like it might be *oh*, yes. How long since you did this?”

“What?” Words were failing me. All I wanted was for that fine-carved mouth to cover mine again. “Sex?”

“It's strange—you seemed quite articulate when you arrived. Yes. How long since you did sex?”

Oh, if I let the bastard make me laugh I was done for. Laughter would tell him everything was okay, that we were just two horny males about to have a casual roll-around beneath the painted heavens. “That's just the bloody point,” I growled. “It's been ages. I got hurt, and as you've seen, I can't even climb bloody stairs, let alone...”

“You're scared you can't do it any more?”

My jaw dropped in outrage. I'd now had six excruciating sessions with the Mansion Street counsellor, who although a very nice and competent woman had never got closer to this issue than *fears concerning your potency, DS Carr*. “I'm not scared of anything,” I said, returning truth for truth. “I think it'll just bloody hurt.”

“Okay.” He put a hand to my face and gently turned it, breaking the deadlock of our gaze. I didn't know why these touches of his to my cheek, to my mouth, undid me so. I wanted them to go on forever. They were burningly intimate, between two men who barely knew one another, and no other lover had wanted to spend that much time with me that far above the waist. “Okay. Look at my bed.”

I couldn't do anything else. I was relieved to see it was ordinary. A drug-fuelled fantasy of carved jungle vines might have put me off, if anything could do that now. It looked solid and nice, inviting under its smooth grey blanket. “What about it?”

“Can you lie down on your back without it hurting?”

“Er... yes. Mostly.”

“That's all you'd have to do.”

“Oh... *God*.” The import of his words swept through me. Images crowded into my mind. I made one last effort—to break away from him, from this impossible situation—and he stilled my recoil effortlessly, dropping my jumper, taking hold instead of my shoulder, slipping his free hand round the back of my head. He drew me in, and after a second's resistance I groaned and surrendered, moving to meet him halfway. I grabbed at his shirt to steady myself and then I somehow had both arms around him, feeling the sensuous shift of his waist, his ribs. His kiss met

and shot past my yearning fantasy of it, hard with passion, satiny hot and responsive—he opened up for me at the first press of my tongue, his fingers clasp gently at my skull as he let me inside. My cock heaved to full erection. Maybe I'd been wrong—maybe I *could* still do this like a normal human being, and because his hips were clamped to mine, his hard-on tight and satisfactory and there, I thrust against him.

Shit. Wrong move. I held on to the kiss so he wouldn't see my eyes squeeze shut with pain. Maybe he'd mistake the spasm that jerked through me. But I should have known better. He would be the type of lover who kept track of every move—not like Jack, whose rugby-tackle approach had done the job for me as long as I'd been strong and whole. He caught me, holding me fast by the shoulders. “Vince?”

“Nothing. I'm all right.”

“Bollocks. I've seen you fall over before, remember? Come here. Come here.”

I lay down on the bed. No—not even that much of an effort. He laid me down. He pushed me by the shoulders until my legs buckled, then he planted a hand flat on my chest, wrapped an arm round my back so I wouldn't go down too hard, and before I could protest, reached to scoop me up from behind my knees. That last gesture—so fearless and sudden—broke my control, and I burst into the dangerous peal of laughter that I'd managed to avoid before. “What the fuck are you playing at?”

“What's it look like? Just lie still a minute.” He grinned down at me. “Oh, you do look fetching there.”

I doubted that. I imagined I looked like an idiot knocked flat on his arse, not daring to encounter the indignity of trying to get up. Then Rowan began to unbutton his shirt, and I left off thinking about anything at all.

He was beautiful. He didn't hurry, and he never broke his eye contact with me. What had looked like skinniness beneath his clothes turned out to be lean muscle when it was revealed. I tossed away the last of my professional reserve and allowed myself one low whistle as he shrugged out of his shirt, and he grinned and blushed. “Thank you, DS Carr.”

“Now I can see how you hauled me up all those stairs.”

“It's not virtue. Looks like I have to be hooked on something, and I figured it had better be the gym.” Involuntarily I glanced at the insides of

his arms, and he shifted, showing me the pale unmarred skin. "I am clean. I wouldn't let myself be with you otherwise."

"Rowan, you don't have to tell me—"

"I do. You're a cop, and I saw the look in your eyes when you heard the word *junkie*." His jeans were button-fly, and again he took his time. He pushed them down his thighs, then bent and stepped out of them. He stood naked by the bed. His shaft had sprung up, stiff and dark with blood. "All right," he said softly. "Now you."

I wasn't sure what he meant until he knelt over me. His thighs corded tensely with the care he took not to put any weight on me, and he took hold of the hem of my T-shirt. "Can you lift up a bit?"

"Why?"

"I want to see you too. All of you. Can you sit up?"

I could, with a good careful crunch of my abs. The ogre of the physio department had taught me that, a way of getting off my back without too much pain or embarrassing struggle. His lips parted as I made the move, a hungry appreciation gleaming in his eyes. I held myself taut in position, glad to be able to do one thing with a little grace, while he peeled the T-shirt up and over my head. He ran his palms down my chest. "Lovely," he said. "Now lie back and let's see about the rest."

Lifting my hips for him wasn't so easy. The second bullet was lodged just above my sacral vertebra. I tried to smile up at him, but he saw straight through that and sat back lightly on my thighs, resting both hands on my hipbones. I growled in frustration. He was so lovely, and I'd moved from shocked resistance to an urgent desire to get myself fucked. "Damn," I rasped. "I used to be good at this."

"I bet you're spectacular now, once you're warmed up."

"No, I'm really not. And it's all my own fault. I could have surgery to fix all this—climb stairs and run around and... do sex, but I'm too bloody scared."

"What, you? Hardarse Carr, the terror of Mansion Street? There must be some big risks involved."

"Yeah. Fifty-fifty odds on paraplegia."

His reaction was an odd relief to me. My doctors related this statistic with bland professional cheer, and everyone else I'd spoken to about it seemed to have instructions to keep me positive too. Rowan just looked

horrified, and for the first time my own horror became less of a shame to me, less of a brand of cowardice. Every morning I asked myself why the hell I didn't just go ahead—what kind of life I had now. “Jesus,” he said. “How are you meant to make that decision?”

“I don't know. Been trying for six months.”

“Okay. Do you have to... Do you have to make it right now?”

I frowned. “No, of course not. Why—”

“And have you got anywhere you have to be dashing off to?”

The distress in his eyes was kindling to a benign mischief. “No,” I said cautiously. “You've seen what happens when I try to dash.”

“Good. Because there's just no hurry, Vince. You're wired with stress and nerves and wanting to dive in and show me you're still up for this, or...” He pressed his fingers to my mouth to stop my protest. “Or to show yourself, but if you can stay—well, we've got all night if you want it. We can take all night.”

He lifted his hand, but whatever I'd been going to say had dissolved from my overloaded brain. He got up, leaving me lying there. I watched while he went to the bedroom window, another of the strange fish-eye portholes, and drew a gauzy curtain across it. That one opened onto the lower slate rooftop next door, and the thin cloth, rippled through with bronze threads, transformed the streetlight to gleaming shadows. Then he went and opened the top drawer of a cabinet on the far side of the room. He was giving me time to study him, I realised—moving slowly, unashamedly turning so I could get the full picture of his narrow hips, his smooth-skinned backside. He touched buttons on a music player I couldn't see, and the room filled with a low, pulsating beat.

That was a step too far. Whatever the forces that had tugged me into his bed, they weren't romantic ones. I pushed up onto one elbow, as best I could. “Er, Rowan...”

“What's the matter?”

“Don't worry about the music. I—I'm not sure we should take this too seriously.”

Once more I'd flattered myself. He came back to the bed with a half-hitched grin that clearly told me so. “Who said anything about serious?” he asked, straddling me once more. “I just said we could take it slow.”



I fell back onto the pillow, chuckling in spite of myself. The music slipped into the background and I forgot about it, except that it was deep, low, a half-felt vibration that took the edge off silence and eased movement. All right—if I didn't have to perform, taking it slow was good for me. I got the feeling—a first for me—that the end result might mean less than the process, with Rowan at least. He'd started to work on my zip, then apparently changed his mind. He was stroking his palms over my belly, pressing my erection through the denim. I turned my head aside, not wanting him to see how good that felt to me, and I raised my arms so I could grasp at the bars of the bed-head. I pushed my face against my own bicep, hiding, and in a surge of pleasure nipped and tugged at my own skin. It had been so long since I'd experienced anything but anxious disgust for my body's workings. For weeks there had been nothing but bedpans and pain, and the daily discovery of what no longer worked. “Rowan...”

“Yes, handsome?”

“Touch me.”

He'd got some kind of oil from his cabinet drawer, and his palms were slick and warm when they closed on me. There was that newfound erogenous patch again, the hollow at the base of my ribs. He started there, a circling caress, his thumbs dipping into my navel then pushing down firmly an inch or so below it, a pressure that made me moan and get harder still. I gasped as he slid quickly up and covered my nipples, a part of me Jack had always bypassed in favour of more relevant biology. I'd never known till now that I was pierced through there with delicate, tight-strung nerves, and I was glad I didn't have to articulate for Rowan my desire to be squeezed, caught between fingertip and thumb, and then when the rich leafy scent of the oil was making me float, gently sucked and bitten. My breath came and went in tides. “Please,” I managed. “Please go back down.”

“Ready for me now?”

“Yes.” What was I ready for? I tried to pick one thread out of the fabric we were weaving, the shifting gold and bronze. “I've been scared I can't do it any more, can't just get turned on and come.”

He kissed the base of my throat, pressed his tongue into the hollow. “Was there that kind of damage?”

“I don't know. Don't think so, but...”

“You haven't tried—not even by yourself?”

I shook my head. There'd been a few occasions, but I'd always felt so cold, my own hand rough and out of practice. "I'm not sure why. Maybe I wanted to..."

"Give yourself the benefit of the doubt?"

That was exactly it. I couldn't have finished the thought for myself, but this was the exact equivalent of that terrifying second op. If I didn't try, I didn't have to know. Maybe my failure with Jack had been down to more than shock and morphine. I squeezed my eyes shut. Landing in this stranger's bed was bad enough. How was I going to feel if the excitement coursing through me died away to nothing, leaving me beached and useless? As if the fear had been enough, my hard-on flagged. "Oh, God."

"You know what?" Rowan sat up. He crouched over my thighs, and before I had time to draw another breath, unfastened my jeans. "The brain and the cock—two separate organs. Don't try to run them at the same time, DS Carr."

Every time I got close to a wallow in my misfortunes, the bastard made me laugh. That distracted me while he eased the denim down, and the boxers underneath, exposing my half-quelled erection. "You'll be fine," he told me, rubbing more of the warm oil onto that sweet spot just below my navel. "Just leave it all to me. Wait a sec—sorry about the mechanics..."

I didn't mind. A packet of condoms and a tube of KY had always signalled something hot and good about to happen. I was glad somebody was prepared—not part of my standard interview kit—and their prosaic packaging lent reality to Rowan Clyde's exotic scene. I put out a hand for the condoms. "Let me do that for you."

"I won't need one, not for this round."

"Oh." I tried to readjust my ideas. I hadn't got as far as a vision of how this was going to play out, but I'd thought he was going to fuck me. I was the semi-helpless one. I'd assumed he would maybe lift my legs and... "Oh, right." His fingers were trailing up and down my shaft. When he stopped that and popped open one of the rubbers, fitted it over my tip, a hot surge ran through me and I swelled up stiff and straight to meet him. I chuckled helplessly, relieved and embarrassed by my resurrection.

"There you go. Told you—cock, not brain." He rolled the condom deftly down into place, then uncapped the KY. "Let's get you lubed up."

I couldn't let him. The channels had cleared, but my control over them was minimal. If he touched me much more with those beautiful hands I would come. "Let me do this part," I whispered, and he smiled as if he understood, surrendering the tube. I attended to myself in light, brisk strokes, then looked up at him. "Now you. Let me do it for you."

For the first time I saw a crack in his poise. So far he'd been in perfect charge of these proceedings. But when he leaned forward, taking his weight on his arms so I could reach round him, his face altered, as if he hadn't expected to be on the receiving end of much attention or tenderness. Well, I could still manage those. I hadn't been shot in the heart. I slipped my lube-soaked fingers between his buttocks, gently seeking target. There it was—tight and small, but quivering open at my touch. His dark fringe fell forward so I couldn't see his face, and a low moan broke from him. I squeezed out more KY and rubbed it round his hole, gasping and sliding a finger inside him at the muscle's sudden welcoming gape. "Oh, stop," he grated out. "You're too bloody much, you are."

I'd been so afraid of being much too little. I caressed him, withdrawing the finger but stroking firmly at his muscle ring. "Am I?"

"Oh, yeah. Look at you. You've been through the mill, but I can still see all that training. Lovely."

"Not... half a decade older than it should be?"

He made a wry face. "Sorry. No, that was just pain – you're fine. You make me think of Tynemouth sands, the colour of your hair, and those rain-cloud eyes..."

I chuckled helplessly. No-one had ever described my debatable charms aloud before. "Well, that's Tynemouth for you."

"And those good hands. One day, if we ever got the chance, I'd have you do that all bloody afternoon."

I wouldn't have minded if it had been now. I'd never been with a man who'd spent so much time exploring me, touching me—playing with me, I supposed, if the whole thing hadn't felt so very serious. With Jack it had been straight down to business. "Want me to?"

"Not this time. This time just fuck me." He pushed upright, the lovely lean muscles rising in his arms. He got his balance, spread his thighs and settled over me. "Fuck me, Vince."

I slid into him so easily. The muscles that had felt so good clenching round my fingers nearly killed me in their grip on my shaft: I had to reach for the bed-head again and hang on just to stop myself peaking out on the spot. I arched my head back, biting my lip. The music, which had faded to the background while we talked and messed around, suddenly pulsed up again, and I felt its beat like a lifting force beneath me. Yes, high—I felt high, and wild thoughts of strange ingredients in Rowan's massage oil flitted through my head. But it was just freedom from pain. For months I had been fighting it. Even when numbed out by pills it had been there, a waiting beast. Pain and cold. Here in this man's hothouse world, torrents of endorphins flooding my blood, I was flying. I thrust up and it didn't hurt, but Rowan growled a warning and stopped me, pinning me with his weight. “No. Let me do the work.”

He did. Once I'd deep-breathed past early climax I could risk a look at him, and then I couldn't look away. He was flushed, his shaft raised almost to his belly. Veins throbbed in his neck as he shifted and writhed to take me deeper. I whispered his name and put out a hand to him. He gripped my wrist, using me for balance, and he began a rhythm. “That's it,” he breathed. “You just stay where you are. There's nothing wrong with you—nothing at all.”

He rode me, cautiously for a few seconds more and then harder. Sweat broke in a sheen across his chest. I held on to him frantically, and he flexed forward suddenly to kiss me and climaxed, shuddering. His convulsive movements continued, hauling me straight up after him. I lost control and bucked wildly into his body, not caring if I knocked the bullet hard enough into my spine to kill me outright. I cried out, the raw sound of it shaming me, but the next lungful of air I could get tore from me in the same way—again, louder, and at last I was coming, giving over everything I had. Tears burned me blind. “Rowan!”

“Yes. There, you're okay. I've got you.” His arms closed around me. His mouth brushed hotly over my ear and the side of my face. I tried to hang on, because his embrace felt so good, but my flight was over and I was dropping into the dark. I buried my fingers in his hair. “I've got you,” he repeated. “It's okay. Sleep now. Go to sleep.”

\* \* \*

My arm was heavy and slack when I raised it to look at my watch. Just after four in the morning. This was the second good night's sleep I owed to Rowan Clyde, the full recommended eight hours. I lay for a while, watching shadows come and go on the ceiling, headlights transformed by the gauzy curtain into glittering wings. The next set were blue, moving slowly. A police car, trawling the cobbles of the Bigg Market for the last catch of trouble of the night...

I had to wake up. I belonged with the blue lights out there, not the gauze-filtered glow that had briefly softened the world for me. The return wasn't easy. My muscles felt dissolved. My mind flashed back over the long, incandescent come Rowan had pulled from my flesh, and a warm pulse of backwash arousal went through me. God, there were a few hours left of the night, weren't there? Was there a niche in time, a short-lived alternative universe, where I could wake Rowan and have that ecstatic struggle and release again?

I rolled onto my side. It hurt, but not as much as usual, and I put out a hand to find him. "Rowan?"

I was alone in the bed. Reluctantly I sat up, familiar weights of pain fastening themselves into place. His absence struck me coldly. I'd have pegged him for someone who liked to share space after a fuck. Even Jack would stick around until he'd got his breath back. Still, it was better this way—would make it easier for me to gather up my things, get dressed and go.

First I had to find out if this rococo palace of his had a bathroom. My hand closed on a soft woollen robe, as if he'd left it there for me to find. He'd put a quilt over me too. We'd made love on his grey blanket, and he hadn't disturbed me to get me under the sheets. He was kind. I didn't understand his generosity to a discourteous stranger who had marched into his life demanding he risk his own to help stop Goran Maric, but it had been nice.

It didn't alter the facts. I was a copper, and I'd gone way out of line. I got up, shrugging into the robe. From him I'd have expected exotic silk, but the garment was ordinary, soft and very good of its kind. He kept wrong-footing me. The whole Arabian Nights atmosphere of his domain was underpinned with warm practicalities where they mattered most.

He was sleeping in a chair by the window. The lights from outside were drifting over his naked flesh, and he was so still he'd become part of the room's patchwork shadows. He'd been there all along. My chagrin at waking alone faded out, and I took the grey blanket off the bed—there was one damp patch, but it hadn't suffered too much—and carefully draped it over him.

No murals or baroque extravaganzas in the bathroom. It was down at the end of one of the labyrinth corridors, a plain, handsome space, clean white Victorian fittings shining serenely. I hadn't taken too seriously Rowan's assertion that he could only paint while he was high, but now I began to sense the divide in him. Perhaps the man who liked solid beds, grey blankets and plain bathrooms *did* need something to bridge the gap. I shook myself. The last thing I needed was to sympathise with his addictions. Real artists just did what they did, didn't they? It was a job. If they were serious about it, anyway.

I stared at myself in the mirror. When had I become so intolerant? My dad had used to annoy me with pronouncements like that, usually followed up by some choice remarks about hippies and layabouts. I'd made sure I was neither, but I didn't think I'd internalised the old sod to that extent. I was even starting to look like him. He'd have liked that, if he'd lived to see it—the good son, the copper, cast in his image.

Though maybe not in another man's dressing gown, mouth swollen with kisses, and a small but distinct lovebite over one nipple. I turned away from my reflection and went to relieve my aching bladder, then splashed enough cold water into my face to wake me up. It was definitely time for me to go.

I didn't want to leave Rowan without a word. My trusty police notebook was in my pocket, and reflecting with shame that I hadn't even got as far as taking it out, I backtracked through the corridors to the place where he had divested me of my coat, the first move in a series of unshellings that had ended with me naked in his bed. I tried to think what to write. *Thank you* seemed inadequate, though in fact I was grateful—for the first time in months I hadn't woken desperately grabbing for my painkillers.

Somehow I took a wrong turn between the bedroom and the hall. I found myself in a room little more than a deep alcove at an angle of the corridor, and I turned, but before I could retreat, a faint gleam of gold caught my eye. A subtle fragrance filled the air. I paused, trying to analyse

it—leather and paper, evocative, spicy. Vision adjusting, I saw that the room was packed floor to ceiling with shelves of beautiful old books.

They looked and smelled nothing like my collection of paperbacks back home. Their spines invited touch. I took down and opened one exquisite volume. The lettering was in a script I didn't recognise, but I didn't need language skills for this one. I couldn't suppress a grunt of surprise. Rowan's paintings were subtle—you had to attune your gaze before their eroticism came to meet you halfway. The illustration shimmering up at me left no room for doubt. It was a starkly detailed ink portrayal of five lovers locked in acrobatic embrace. I couldn't work out who was doing what to whom, or even if the participants were men or women. Breasts seemed to rise from the same slim torsos where upright shafts were springing. Fascinated, I turned the book a little, trying to make sense of the scene.

“You found my collection.”

“Christ!”

Six months behind a desk hadn't done anything to blunt my street-copper's reflexes. I didn't jump, but I jolted round, dropping the book, hands twitching hopelessly for a gun I hadn't gone near, touched or even looked at since that summer night. Rowan took a step back from me, gesturing surrender with upraised palms. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“Don't fucking creep up on me.”

“I didn't creep. I spoke to you. You were... absorbed.”

I glared at him, trying to climb back down. That hadn't been just a hard-trained defence reaction. Fear had gone through me like a bell. I could taste bitter metal in my throat and my bladder had tried to give. Oh, I was screwed, wasn't I—even if I got back my physical form, what use was I with shattered nerves? “Well, next time speak louder. I've got to go.”

“Okay.” He bent to pick up the book. I was grateful he'd stopped to put on pyjama trousers before coming looking for me, though these were soft and clinging and did little by way of concealment. “I'll help you find your stuff.”

“Did I hurt it?”

“What?”

“The book. Dropping it like that. Is it okay?” He looked up at me in amusement. I didn't blame him—I was still rapping out the questions, as if

he and the book had been dragged into custody. "Sorry. Just... all these look like antiques. I wasn't sure I should be touching them."

"What good's a book that can't be touched?" As if to prove the point, he offered the little volume back to me.

"No, ta. I'm not sure I'm old enough. What the hell is that?"

"Reproductions from a legendary Sanskrit work on sacred eroticism. Connecting to the gods through sex."

"Oh." Well, I'd asked. I cleared my throat, tried to get a more civil tongue into my head. I owed him that much for the touch of reconnection he'd given me, if nothing else. "Are they all... All these books, are they about the same thing?"

"And variations. I'm interested in erotic art. I've found that the further you go back, the less gender seems to matter. The lines become less distinct."

I nodded, the vivid little hermaphroditic torsos dancing in my memory. "Where did you get them all?"

"Oh, you know—the internet puts you into every bookshop in the world."

"You never ordered this lot off Amazon."

"No, of course not. Antiquarian sites."

He was smiling, but his defences had gone up. Evading the question... I wondered why, then remembered I was meant to be extracting myself from this man and his possessions, not falling deeper into their intriguing coils. "I really do have to go."

"Did it hurt? When I startled you, and you twisted round?"

"It doesn't matter."

"You're pale. Come and sit down for a minute."

I should have refused. I would have, if he hadn't taken hold of my hand. His fingers closed round mine as if I'd been a child in need of leading, and I followed him back into his street-lit living space. I hadn't spent long in there before—too busy melting and kissing my way into his bedroom—and hadn't noticed the curtain over the archway in one corner. He drew it back for me. "Here. I took this flat because I got the two turret rooms. I often sit in here and watch the night."

"Don't you sleep well?"



“Card-carrying insomniac.” Our eyes met, this time in recognition. He was still holding my hand. “Takes one to know one, right?”

“Just since my accident. I used to crash out like... Well, the way you knocked me out tonight.”

It was the nearest I could get to thanking him for the sweetest, hottest fuck I'd ever known. I hoped he could fill in the gaps. His pupils dilated—message received and understood, I guessed, and he gave my hand a squeeze and let me go. “Sit down. Have you ever tried absinthe? Not the synthetic they sell over here. The real thing.”

“The real thing’s illegal.” And it wasn’t the time—I was on my way out. I opened my mouth to tell him, but he'd disappeared into the living room's shadows. Giving it up for the moment, I looked around me. The second turret room was larger, a circle big enough to contain an ornate sofa and an easy chair. Both were upholstered in faded green velvet. To my inexperienced eye they looked French, and altogether the little scene was baroque, a shabbily beautiful garret that could have been poised above the streets of Paris, not my grim old town.

My back did hurt. It was tough, because for once I hadn't brought my knockout painkillers with me. I subsided onto the edge of the armchair. That and the sofa were turned to give a view out through another of the great round windows. I could see from the zenith of the blue-black heavens right down to the cobbles below. The street was almost empty now, the city poised in its pre-dawn hiatus before the Saturday world rolled in, the lorries with fresh fish, fruit and veg for the market stalls. It was the very heart of the night.

Rowan pushed back the curtain. He took care not to startle me this time, and I was at once touched and annoyed. I didn't need coddling. He was holding a tray, a little silver one set with two small glasses which somehow caught rainbows in their crystal from the dull light outside. There was a bottle too, its label indistinct. He took a seat on the sofa opposite me and put the tray down on the wide ledge beneath the window. “So bust me,” he said. “Or you could try it. Drink it slow. It's not particularly strong, just... potent.”

I looked at him, wondering about his distinction between strength and potency. He was naked from the waist up, his movements small and

graceful as he uncorked the bottle and poured cloudy green-gold liquid into each of the glasses. He was bloody lovely.

I sat forward. My head was spinning. The night wasn't over, and I wanted to make us quits, and I didn't want either of us thinking it had just been the absinthe. "Rowan," I said, my voice like a stranger's in my ears. "Don't move for a second. Just..."

I got down and knelt in front of him. I heard and ignored his faint gasp. The sofa was a good height for me, and I was hurting anyway—this wouldn't make it worse. I grasped his knees and pushed them wide apart.

"Vince, what are you... Oh, God."

"Be quiet. Let me see you." The pyjamas were drawstring and opened when I tugged. He was soft with astonishment but it only took a kiss to his belly, a couple of burrowing tongue-swipes into the silky crease beneath his hipbones, and his cock surged up, pulsing hotly against my cheek. "Yes," I whispered, leaning in and ignoring a bright splash of pain to make a quick dive for his balls. I closed my lips round each of them as far as I could, aided by his shuddery upward thrust, then when I couldn't bear that angle any more, sat back on my heels. "Let me suck you. Let me do something good for you."

"You already did. You were so good. You don't have to—"

"*Please.*" I cupped him, feeling him damp and pulsating where my mouth had been. "Let me."

I took him in. I was still good for this. Damn good, actually—Jack had been a big lad, and importunate too, not always giving me a lot of preparation time. He'd kept me in practice. Rowan would be easy by contrast... or so I thought until he groaned, grasped my shoulders, swelled and lengthened in my mouth. I sat back. "Wow."

"What is it?"

"Look at the size of you."

"Oh." He flushed up rosily, blood darkening his face just as it was painting his long straight shaft. "I thought you'd seen all that, back when we were..."

"I was distracted then." I dipped back down. My concentration was perfect now. I opened wide, welcoming the push at the back of my throat. Oh, he was nothing like Jack, who liked to lie back and enjoy my services with lordly detachment: he stroked my hair, reached down my back and

held me. I shivered, losing my rhythm of sucking and withdrawal, as he pulled up the dressing gown and caressed my arse. “Lovely backside,” he whispered, in the same barely audible rasp with which I’d thought I’d heard him admire my smile. “Don’t stop. Oh, my God.”

I couldn’t have stopped, not if the angel Gabriel had come down and called time. I loved the feel of him filling me. I squeezed his balls and bore down hard, tears blinding me in the fight not to gag. I would never get the chance to let him fuck me—our worlds were too separate, a thorned barricade between them that would spring up with oncoming dawn—but I could have this. He was breathing harshly now. I clamped my free hand to his thigh to steady myself. His muscles were locked like iron against his instinct to thrust up at me and I gave him my abandonment in answer to his restraint, engulfing his shaft to the root again and again, crushing him with tongue and lips until he stiffened and grated out my name. There was an instant for both of us, a shared thought of pulling back—he recoiled, or tried to—but desire ripped through me, a need to have him come down my throat as intense as his to do it, and we were there, clutching one another frantically. He near drowned me in his spill. I hung on for him, for jet after hot jet, and at last he softened, freeing my airway so I could breathe.

I knelt trembling and gasping at his feet. His brow was pressed to the top of my skull. He was pressing hot kisses to the short-cropped hair of my crown. His hands gathered up the fabric of my robe, lifting, stroking the skin beneath.

He was very close to my scars. I tensed, trying to get my head up. I didn’t like to be touched there. The skin was at once hypersensitive and weirdly numb, as if it belonged to someone else. I hated how they looked and how they made me feel, the pain and the dragging disgrace that attached to them. “Don’t,” I muttered, flinching. “Not there.”

“I’m sorry.” He kissed me again, on the side of the neck this time, but he didn’t let me go. “Is this from your accident?”

“Yeah. Leave it, Rowan. It’s ugly.”

“No, it’s just... Jesus, it must hurt.” His finger traced the long vertical incision where I’d been cut open. The touch made me feel at once sick and hungry, as if I could dissolve beneath his caress and either die or be made whole. “This was from the surgery, right? And this—bloody hell, this looks like...”

I could tell him. I could tell him here and now, resting my brow on his thigh, or I never would. No-one beyond my doctors, my colleagues and my immediate family knew. I'd been commended for my sacrifice—had gone down in the line of duty, but shame burned me up every time I thought about that night. I remembered it one way, and Jack had remembered it different. Jack had to be right, of course. I'd been facedown on the concrete, blind with blood loss, dying, so of course his sworn version of events was better than mine. I wanted to believe that. Wanted to believe that what Jack and I had, that bond forged and hammered tight on the anvil of all our shared dangerous days, would never have permitted him to see me gunned down and then turn tail and run. "It's a bullet hole," I said hoarsely, closing my eyes in the soft cotton of Rowan's pyjama trousers. "I was shot."

He lifted me carefully. "Sit in the armchair. It'll be easier for you than the sofa." I thought about arguing, but he was right: the chair's worn velvet embraced me. I was even able to draw my knees up to my chest the way I wanted, to curl up and tuck my feet under me. He handed me one of the little crystal glasses and I took it gingerly, uncertain of my grip. "There," he said. "Slow, remember?"

He sat back down opposite me. He hadn't refastened his pyjama cord and I could see the V of his skinny belly, the places I'd kissed to arouse him. I could taste his come. Sucking him off had made me hard, but that had subsided thoroughly. I took a sip from the glass, expecting it to taste like sherry, or something my gran would palm off on me at Christmas. A kind of golden explosion hit the root of my tongue, and I choked, clamping a hand to my mouth. Aniseed and nameless herbal vapours rose into my sinuses. I coughed, and just had time to set the glass down before a violent sneeze shook me. "Jesus fucking Christ."

Rowan watched this performance in silence. He'd been kind enough not to laugh, but his dark eyes were glimmering. "Which part of *slow* did you not hear?"

"I thought I'd... *been* slow. What the hell is this?"

"I told you. Proper absinthe, from a dark little bar in Montmartre, where they haven't changed a stick of furniture since the 1890s and the artists pay for their drinks by leaving sketches on the walls. Try it again—as if it was snake venom this time—and I'll tell you something about myself." He smiled. "It's not that I think I'm particularly fascinating, but policemen love

background, don't they? And then it'll be only fair that you tell me something in return."

I struggled to collect myself and focus. Maybe even here, in these extreme circumstances, I might be said to be doing my job. If Rowan started talking, who knew where it could lead? I might be able to bring my good and patient boss a witness after all. I lifted the glass to my lips again, this time barely sampling the agate poison inside it. Again there came the hit, but now it was tinged with sunlight, and I saw a summer meadow open in the back of my mind. "All right. Sounds like a deal."

"Okay." He too tucked his feet up under him, mirroring my gesture, as if settling in for a story. "I didn't send away for any of the stuff in this flat. I bought it all myself. I travelled to all the places where the things were made—Kerala for the Sanskrit book, Japan for some of the others, dozens more bazaars and alleyway bookshops in the Far East. I had a job in acquisitions for one of the London museums, and they sent me everywhere."

It didn't occur to me to disbelieve him. The story didn't fit with the semi-derelict garret, the struggle to make ends meet on a small-time curator's salary, but his gaze was calm and direct. "That must have been amazing. Why did you stop?"

"I said I'd tell you one thing. It's your turn now."

I rested my brow on the wing of the chair. I could see that summer meadow definitely now, and it was a memory, not hallucination. *Meadow* wasn't quite accurate, though, not by the time my brother and I had found it—just the last green space left over from a building project, a raw-brick new estate mushrooming up half a mile from our own. We'd found it in the first summer when we'd both been big enough to put serious distance between ourselves and home. I'd been eight or so, Phil twelve. He'd been a fantastic big brother that year, playing with me tirelessly, nicking bricks from the building site to construct a den. That winter he discovered new mates, a gang from his senior school, and with them came car-jacking, aerosols, glue-sniffing, stolen booze and crack. He'd spent the next summer in a young-offenders unit, no visitors allowed. Fine with me—I hadn't wanted to visit him by then. I'd visited the meadow instead, but the project had been finished, two dozen meanly constructed houses where the grass had been. "I don't have any good stories to tell," I said. "No exotic past jobs. I've just always been a copper."

“A copper who got shot. Tell me that story.”

I did. Sort of. The absinthe curled golden tendrils round my defences until they were nothing but ivy-clad ruins, and I talked. I told him Jack's version because, even drunk and unravelled, I wanted to sound sane, and Jack's was the sane variation. *I was there with Jack. Yeah, that's right—Brad Pitt. I was going for a rooftop sniper and another one got me in the back. Jack couldn't help me. He'd seen another group of Maric's men heading up to ambush our unit. He had to go after them.*

“Oh, God. Goran Maric did this to you?”

I surfaced. I'd told him this much in an underwater dream. I didn't know why he'd gone white to the lips, why he was looking so sick. “Not personally. One of his mob. We didn't even get the bastard that night, after all that.”

“You think Jack left you to die.”

I put the little glass down before it smashed in my grip. Jack and I hadn't been perfect, but we'd been partners, and I'd have punched anyone in the face who'd breathed a word against him. “Of course he bloody didn't! He was my partner. You know nothing about coppers, the way we work. If you did, you'd know how tight we hang together – it's that or let this damn world hang us one at a time.” My heart was thumping. I was furious – and worse than that, scared. Scared by the sound of my own voice defending Jack, my sense of self, everything I'd founded on that partnership. I shouldn't have to. “Anyway, I didn't say that.” I was suddenly terrified that I had, my tongue loosened to treachery by the absinthe. “Did I?”

“No. No, you didn't.” He got up and stood over me. Jack's story was the right one—that was my gospel, my scaffold. I wanted to grab him, drag him down to me and shout it in his face, but he was so bruised already, and his expression was so kind I couldn't handle it: I turned my face aside and shut my eyes.

His hand closed gently on my shoulder. “Why don't you grab a couple of hours more sleep?” he asked, his tone ordinary, as if I hadn't just allowed him free access to my deepest, dirtiest wounds. As if he'd be willing to forget I ever spoke. “It's still early. Do you have to work today?”

If I knew what day it was, I could give him an answer. “Yeah,” I said roughly, just in case. “I've got a morning shift.”

“I'll wake you at seven, then. Will that be okay?”

I couldn't even tell him that much. I was adrift in deep waters, a sea of truth and lies. I'd never dared swim there in case I couldn't tell which was which, in case I never reached the shore again. But it was too late now. His hand left my shoulder, and I sank away, at the last instant choosing, turning my drowning thoughts into a dive.

\* \* \*

Seven o'clock was a bleak hour, even in Rowan's enchanted castle. I woke with the sense of a broken spell, my heart bumping painfully. Those beautiful windows, so charming at night, in this pale winter morning let in a light like thin gruel. The heating must have gone off. A draught trailed cold fingertips over the back of my neck, and my five o'clock shadow scraped on the velvet when I moved my head. I got up stiffly and stood clutching at the back of the chair, waiting for the wave of pain to subside. I hadn't gone without my dope for this long since leaving the hospital. This was why. When I was reasonably sure I wasn't about to throw up, I looked around me.

The flat was empty. There were dozens of places where Rowan could be sleeping or working, but I was convinced I was alone. Desolate relief shook me. The draught was a breath of reality. What the hell had I done? If he was out of the way for a moment, I had to make good my escape, even if that did mean I was a fuck-and-run coward. This time I wouldn't risk stopping to leave him a note.

I stumbled back to the bedroom—the place was easy enough to navigate now, not the honeytrap maze of the small hours—and found my clothes, which had been picked up off the floor and folded for me nicely on the dresser. They still felt horrible going on, like old skins I'd shed to allow for new growth and now had to pack myself back into. I didn't dare glance in the mirror. There I'd meet the eyes of a man who wanted to crawl away and hide somewhere in this flat until the night and its magic came down again. Once dressed, flesh crawling, I hurried to the hallway and shrugged into my coat. I checked my pockets for my badge, my keys, the things I'd need to make a dignified exit and not come back.

The front door clicked and opened. Rowan came in quietly, glancing over his shoulder before he shut the door. He was carrying a bag from the Bigg Market bakers, the one that opened early to cater to the traders and the

hangover crowd. He saw me, dressed, ready to go, and smiled uncertainly. "Sorry. I was just about to wake you, then I realised I never even fed you, before we..."

He trailed off. And that was the problem. There was literally nothing he and I could talk about which wouldn't lead us straight into the fire. I had to end it, douse the glowing ashes all around us, and right now. "I've got to go. What we did—that was all my fault. I was irresponsible. It can't ever happen again, and..."

"Don't."

He cut me off dead with that one quiet syllable. He edged by me in the narrow hall, not touching, and he went to the living-room window, dumping the baker's bag on the table as he passed. The contents smelled good, as if he'd guessed my weakness for a toast-and-marmite breakfast on cold mornings. I thought he was going to give me a scene. The set of his shoulders was rigid. He looked thin again, with the cold light pouring round him. What was I going to do if he freaked out on me? I'd risked everything on a total stranger. He knew where I worked, where I lived. Worse, if I'd had my time over, I'd have risked it all again. I wanted to be back in bed with him. He was still gazing out into the street. He turned to me suddenly, his expression ordinary. Quite composed and cheerful. "Don't be daft. Go now, before you're late for your shift."

I swallowed. "Are... Are you okay?" He looked it. What the hell was wrong with me, that I straight away wished he didn't?

"Yeah, of course. It was a great night. Here, take these with you."

"What?"

"I got you some breakfast."

"What about you?"

"I'll grab something later. I've got to work—that restoration job I was busy with before I was so rudely interrupted."

"Oh. Oh, okay." I hesitated, awkwardly running a hand across my hair. I'd been let off the hook with a vengeance. I didn't quite know how to leave.

He came back to me, holding out the aromatic bag. He was still smiling, but there was a shadow in his eyes, an urgency. "Go on, Vince. Seriously, I'm running late. Go now."

What – now he couldn't get me out the door fast enough? Had I really read him so wrong? Just for an instant, when he'd first seen me in my coat,



he'd looked gutted. "I wish I could tell you I could leave you alone about this case," I said roughly. "Well, maybe I can personally. I can tell my boss I don't want to lean on you any more. But that might just mean he'll send somebody else."

"Okay. Whatever. I'll deal with that when it comes." He put a hand to my back – carefully, knowing now exactly where and how it hurt – but with some force, and he actually propelled me to the door.

My confusion only lasted as long as it took me to find my way back to the lift. And by the time its heavy cage had rattled up to me, I had it all worked out. What an amazing conceit of my own importance I'd managed to dream up between my arrival in this great wrought-iron box and my departure! I'd been transformed by the pleasures of the night—given wings, a wild flight out of my cold, weary flesh—and so I'd assumed that Rowan had been altered too. Why the hell should he be? For all I knew, he had a lover every weekday night and twice on Sundays. He was a bloody beautiful lay. It seemed unlikely that he'd saved his skills for me. He'd let me go without a pang, and that was that. I should have been gasping with relief. No impassioned pleas, no demands—and they would have been justified—as to what made me think I could walk in, a copper engaged on a murder case, let him screw my brains out, and stroll out in the morning unscathed.

I wasn't unscathed. The relief was there, yes. And under it was bitter disappointment. I was, as I'd briefly let myself forget, nothing special. I stood for a moment on the steps of Half Moon Chambers, my arms folded tight across my chest. I lowered my head, reminded myself not to limp, and I walked back into the day.

## Chapter Seven

I did have a shift that morning, though not the early one I'd told Rowan. I had time to go home, shower and change, and mercifully not enough to think about the process, the new scents on my skin, the trace of semen in the corner of my mouth. Prompt at nine o'clock I was at my desk in Mansion Street, and by five past Bill Hodges was on the other side of it, asking how I'd got on with my witness.

I did my best to tell him. I was used to handing over my reports, and even with the large essential gaps I had to leave, I managed to give a coherent picture of why Rowan Clyde would be an unreliable witness at best, and at worst, an absolute liability for our side – forced into the witness box, vulnerable. I outed him as a recovering addict, feeling a pang of guilt but figuring I'd do the poor sod more of a favour this way. Anyway, it was true. Any decent lawyer would read the signs of it in him and go after him like a shark.

It wasn't what Bill wanted to hear. I watched the disappointment gathering on his face, a look I'd never put there when I'd run in to tell him about my nights cleaning up the streets of the city he loved, and I wished, not for the first time, that the dockland sniper had been a better shot. Bill was decent as always, but Rowan had been our last chance. Maric's defence team were already screaming for the trial process to come to a halt. We had nothing. I felt as if I'd made it less. I sat after Bill left me, staring at the surface of the desk. There wasn't much to look at any more—my successor could have moved in without inconvenience—except the white bottle of pills. I'd already had a dose at home. I'd badly needed that one. I was still hurting now, though less so. I shook a couple more into my hand, and swilled them down with cold coffee, for the first time acknowledging that, as well as pain, they took the edge off intolerable thoughts.

There had to be some way I could get my life back on track, or at least crawl out of this latest wreck. The second dose had put a low-key morphine buzz into my brain. *A false sense of euphoria*, the side-effects label warned, but I was hardly in that exalted state—just a fraction less depressed, and anyway, how could it be false if I was feeling it? I went into Bill's office and told him I wasn't well. He seemed almost relieved to hear it. Maybe it

excused my failure to have Rowan Clyde in here, packed and ready for the safe house; gave him a reason not to write whatever he'd been about to in the personnel file he had open on his desk. I hadn't missed a day's work since I'd been declared fit for it, and I'd often thought it would be easier for Bill and my colleagues if I just took to my bed. A comrade killed in action would have been one thing. Living with his ghost was another. Bill dismissed me home with warm paternal concern. He even called up a constable to drive me there in a squad car.

I got changed once more, shivering in harsh noonday light. My flat after Rowan's was a Meccano scaffold, a skeleton barely sheathed in concrete skin. That didn't matter. I'd be seeing very little of it for the next few days. The clothes I chose were casual. I didn't have a special cupboard where I kept my range of undercover disguises, my hats, wigs and adhesive moustache, but I did know what the junkie down-and-outs of my city wore to work.

I owed that knowledge to Phil. I'd seen plenty of him and his mates, their tracksuit bottoms pulled down low, their knock-off designer sports hoodies gaudy with labels, as if any of them would recognise the inside of a gym. I knew where to find them. That secret too came to me from my brother, from the countless nights when I'd still cared enough to go and drag him home. I knew my city's underworld better than its scrubbed-up millennial surface. Of course there was a chance that I'd be recognised, but the demi-monde population was a shifting one; high turnover, long-term memory not improved by lifestyle. I put some gel into my hair, rubbed it till it stood up in short, aggressive-looking spikes. I found a pair of trainers Phil had nicked and given me one long-gone Christmas. I hadn't been a copper then, and turning him in would have anyway seemed churlish. He had still loved me. I knew that, but his whining declarations when he wanted a loan had sickened me of the idea by then. Usefully, I hadn't shaved. I hadn't wanted to look in a mirror for the time it would take, and my stubble had come in fast and disreputable. That would do.

I spent the day trawling the dark side. Phil's mates, that loose shoal of small-time dealers and hoods, hardly swam in the same waters as a shark like Goran Maric, but somebody somewhere had to know something. Not about the Half Moon Chambers case, maybe, but any other of the countless inroads Maric had made into law and order in this town. I couldn't believe,

after a few hours looking into all those starving, vacant eyes, that somebody somewhere wouldn't take a fat police bribe to testify about something. Christ, if that ran contrary to all our new rules of transparency and accountability, I would slip someone the cash myself out of my savings. There had to be a way.

But Maric, or the fear of him, had zipped up junkie mouths from Cowgate to South Shields. I soon realised I was wasting my time. I gave it up when the short afternoon began to fade, made my way home and sat staring at the walls. I had no mind-blowing murals to distract me here. I only had the regular shriek of the lift, and time and space to realise that despite my efforts not to think of Rowan Clyde, I'd done little else since I'd left him. Leaning in cobbled back alleys, dragging on a cigarette to fit with my companions, the gaunt skinheaded lads who emerged from the brickwork to chase their next score, my mind had flown back to Half Moon Chambers, to a warm solid bed and a smiling, golden-eyed man who had laid me down, straddled me, taken me into his body and rocked with me until sunlight had exploded in my spine.

At least I still had my own drugs. As soon as I realised I was looking forward to the next dose, I lurched off the sofa, grabbed the bottle on the shelf and the back-up I kept in my coat, unscrewed the caps and chucked both lots down the toilet. I was shaking. Addiction, or the tendency toward it, ran in families: I'd learned that much from my training courses, but I couldn't blame Phil for my urge to crack open those pills. That was just me, cold and sick and seeking a quick, easy comfort. I went to look out at the windswept street. Almost immediately, Rowan Clyde appeared on the pavement opposite the gallery. He was walking quickly, his coat collar turned up against the cold. He crossed at the lights, stopping on the island to glance back over his shoulder. He moved like a hunted man. I couldn't see his bruises from this distance but I knew they were still there, warning from a predator who could reach out with deadly force from his cage.

I could see him safe to work from here. If I timed it right, I could watch over all his comings and goings.

Great. Suppose I sat up here, a wingless guardian angel, and one of Maric's thugs jumped out of the carefully landscaped shrubs around the gallery. What was I going to do—chuck peanuts at him? There had been a time, scarcely imaginable to me now, when I'd had access to a long-range

sniper rifle and all the skills and confidence to use it. I would have to undergo reorientation now before Bill Hodges let me carry so much as a riot shield.

All right, I was screwed. I'd lost everything. A handful of the pills would make that better for a while, or at least stave off the truth of it, and that was how I had been using them. I rested my brow on the glass. They were gone. I closed my eyes, and I imagined how my craving for them would feel, magnified a thousand times into a crackhead's need for dope. For the first time in my life, I experienced compassion for a junkie.

And that was no fucking good. I couldn't be a drugs cop with that roiling around in my chest. Worse, it was half a year too late: Phil's poor girlfriend had made her last appeal while my angry, stony heart was still intact. Before I'd realised how easy it would be to fall.

My fists clenched. I kept my nails short, but still they drove hard enough into my palms to draw blood. No fucking good, any of these thoughts—I swung round from the window and went to grab my coat. I had to work. I had to bury myself in Bill Hodges' admin tasks, make coffee for him, empty the bloody Mansion Street wastepaper baskets if necessary—anything rather than sit here and realise I'd abandoned my brother, snatched back my hand when he'd reached for me, as good as let him drop into the Tyne.

\* \* \*

If I'd given up on Maric, I began to think he hadn't given up on me. I was twitchy from my transition from morphine-based analgesics to plain aspirin, and at first I put my sense of being shadowed down to that. But it made sense that he might dog me, newly unloveable as I was. My failure to get anything from the junkie demi-monde didn't mean nothing had passed down the line to him about me, my brief foray into the shadows. I couldn't keep track of all the crackheads Phil had dragged home with him while we'd been growing up, and my undercover hadn't been brilliant. Someone might not have been too stoned to recognise me. *Phil's brother, the plod.*

Oh, yeah, I was irritable. I'd even snapped at Bill Hodges this week, and he'd frowned and told me to mind my bloody lip, but I could tell he thought my current mood more natural than the subdued and cooperative one of the past few months. I was glad someone was pleased. For myself, I was in the

grip of a distaste at my own body and soul that made me want to throw bricks through windows, or better yet get into a stand-up, knock-down brawl with someone, the way I'd sometimes had to in performance of my duties, and never my least favourite part. We were meant to be ever so arm's-length these days, but I'd found a good thump went further than tazers or mace in dealing with most local villains. If they gave as good as they got, I could handle that, and I'd rather take a bruise or two than start laying about me with chemicals and electrical shocks.

When I realised that the prickle at my nape was more than paranoia—when I'd actually seen the same three faces follow me round three consecutive corners—I was almost overjoyed. They'd chosen their time well. I'd gone down a narrow cobbled street across the Market from Half Moon Chambers, not looking up to see if there were lights in the top-floor turret rooms, or even to glance at the damn place. My friend Mario was worried about discrepancies in his pizza-restaurant takings, and I'd promised him a low-key call. That was what I was doing at dusk in the ancient maze of the old town. Probably I'd never see Rowan again even by chance, and if I was finding work in the shadow of his eyrie, that was my own business.

It was a beautiful place to get mugged. I passed the doorway to Mario's and carried on. No reason to disrupt his happy hour with broken chairs and china. He'd have given me refuge, of course, but that wasn't what I wanted. Not at all.

I took a deliberate left into the tiny passageway that led round the back of the Chronicle offices. Nobody came down here. It didn't lead anywhere, didn't connect. It wasn't the route for a stroll. All of which meant that the continuing scrape of footsteps behind me promised me definite trouble—yes, trouble, fat as a Bigg Market lemon and packed full of bitter juice. I heard a coughing laugh as my pursuers dropped the subtle approach. *Stupid fookin' copper's taken a dead end.*

I had indeed. I stopped at the deadest part of it, between a pair of long-abandoned metal bins, and I turned round. Just for the moment I was happy as a sand-flea, and I let it show on my face, the first broad and natural grin that had settled there in months. “Hello, ladies,” I said. “I was gonna punch out the ugly one first. But now I take a look at you, I don't know where to start.”

The three of them stopped. It was always a nice moment, that—the nonplussed second while they tried to figure out why I would flap my red rag under their noses. Maybe they thought I was armed. I unzipped my jacket, opened it wide. “Look. Nothing there. Even if there was, I wouldn't waste a bullet on a bunch of big pansies like you.”

A hand closed on my belt. Before I could jump—before I could even start to wonder how anyone had got that close to me—a grip like a cable tow dragged me backward, hauling me into an alley so tight I hadn't even known it was there. I twisted round, heart contracting painfully, braced for a knife to the gut. I found myself staring into Rowan's wide brown eyes. “Vince,” he whispered, his face a mask of disbelief. “You nutter... Run!”

He should have known running wasn't an option for me, not for long. But his warm hand clamped tight round my wrist, and when he took off I followed. There were things I didn't know about my city, gaps in my back-of-the-hand map of its dark twists and turns. All kinds of shit I couldn't have predicted were going down. My weary worldly knowledge fell off from my shoulders like dried-out clay as I ran—down passageways and steps, up through someone's private yard and back onto the Bigg Market, my hand clenched tight in Rowan Clyde's. Even on the main street he didn't let go of me. Taxis and buses were roaring down the narrow rat-run road: he chose a gap between them with so little to spare that I braced for impact, but he yanked me through and up the kerb on the far side. I slipped on the pavement and he righted me, planted a hand in my back and shoved me into the alley that ran around the back of Half Moon Chambers.

There was a fire escape, the type whose bottom flight was a ladder you had to pull down. Rowan deposited me against a wall. “Stay there,” he ordered me. I had no choice—I was about done for, thunderbolts of pain ripping down my spine and legs. I watched in hazy envy while he leapt like a cat for the rungs. The ladder clattered down. “Right. Go up ahead of me.”

“I can't.”

“Sorry, mate. You have to.”

“Chill out. We've lost them. They probably went under that bus we missed by half an inch.”

He held out a hand to me. It was imperious—a demand, not an invitation. “I'm not about to take that chance.”

I went up the ladder with all the grace of an arthritic cow. I wished I'd made him go first, not have to witness my struggle from behind and beneath. I wasn't too far gone to be bloody embarrassed by situations like this, and I was astounded, nearing the top, to feel the brief caress of his warm palm on my butt. "Come on, DS Carr. Shift that bonny arse."

Despite myself I was grinning when I reached the top. As soon as we'd made it to the landing, Rowan pulled the ladder up after us, grabbed a tarpaulin folded up over the rail and shook it out over the hinges. You'd have to look closely now to find a way up. "Nice," I rasped, then leaned on the rail till the next spasm passed. "Done this before, have you?"

"Once or twice. Now we can go in the back."

"I thought you said you didn't have a fire door."

"I don't. You have to climb onto my neighbour's balcony, then there's a window. Come on."

"Jesus, Rowan."

"I know. You're ready to faint or puke your guts out. You can do it once we're home."

*Home.* The word bladed into me, common as mud, scalpel-sharp. Distracted me so much that I followed him over the low balustrade without a word, accepting his outstretched grasp. He took out a small wedge from behind his neighbour's long-dead potted geraniums, jammed it under the sash frame and levered the window open.

I'd never made it as far as his kitchen. Entering it this way was disorienting, the glowing colours of the rooms beyond like visions from another world. Clambering over the window ledge, aided by his grip on my belt and my armpit, I had time to note a plain, practical space, nice wooden cupboards, slate tiles, and then there was a long slow grey-blizzard slide, and suddenly nothing at all.

"Vince. Vincent!"

*Vincent.* Yeah, that was my wake-up call. Time to get up for school—to come round from a coma, any return to the land of the living I'd rather not have to make. Nobody called me Vincent to offer me coffee and croissants in bed.

"Vincent, for fuck's sake!"

Not my ma, then. Not the surgeon at the Freeman either, unless he'd forgotten his manners. I groaned and lifted my head. I was lying on



Rowan's kitchen floor. He was on his knees beside me, urgently shaking my shoulder. I forced my tongue to move in my dry mouth. "You said I could do this... once we were home."

He released an explosive breath. "Yeah. What next? Do I get you a bucket?"

"Not this time, I don't think." I pushed myself up far enough to sit propped against the wall. "Bloody hell. Next time can we just come in the front door?"

"When we're not being pursued by three times our weight in skinhead gorillas, sure."

"They weren't..." I broke off, coughing. "They weren't that bad. I had it covered. Where did you spring from?"

He didn't answer for a moment. I heard running water, then a cool glass was pressed against my lips. "Drink this. I've been keeping an eye on you, that's all. What were you playing at, taunting those bastards like that?"

I drank the water. It tasted of chlorine and old city drains, but it settled the dust in my throat. Rowan had sat down beside me on the tiles, and there was something in his dark, frightened gaze that made me feel a fraction less resentful about being conscious again. I wiped my mouth on my hand. "Do you never just... fancy a punch-up?"

"Nope." Of course he didn't. He glanced off into the painted rooms, and I guessed what his release would be if he could have it. "Sorry I spoiled it for you."

I ought to be thanking him. Someone was still hammering an iron spike down my spine, though, and manners were for people who could breathe. "Probably was for the best," I grunted, trying to make my lungs expand against the pain.

"I don't know about that. You passed out. You scared the crap out of me. Are you okay?"

*Fine*, was the right answer. Fine, and a swift exit. I couldn't stay here. The places where Rowan was touching me were pain-free islands, the only ones in my whole icy sea. He was steadying my hand on the glass, holding my shoulder. "No!" I barked, startling us both. "I'm fucking not okay. I hate this—all of it. I can't bloody walk, and I can't do my job, and..." His grip tightened. His gaze rested patiently on mine, waiting for the rest. "And everything hurts all the time, and—I'm useless. I should've died, not Phil."

“Your brother? He's dead?”

“Yeah. I forgot to mention that detail. He was a hopeless bloody crackhead but he'd still have made a better go of things than I have.”

“Oh, Vince.”

“Don't!” I recoiled from under his caress. The pain was maddening, a swarm of flies darting at me, biting, blackening the sky. My hand clenched on the glass and I chucked it as hard as I could across the room. It shattered against the far wall, and I burst into tears.

He thudded down beside me. I couldn't see, but I felt him there, warm lithe muscle, the planes of his chest and belly. Shame seized me. I fought, flailing wildly. He caught me in an embrace like steel cables. My lungs wouldn't open. I jerked in a panicky spasm and the air came, one raw sob then another. I buried my face on his shoulder to shut myself up, then to obliterate vision, then because he felt so bloody good that I wanted to die there. He was saying my name, his voice vibrant with shock against my ear, a sound that faded out as I lost my last shreds of control, clenched my fists tight in his jacket and wept.

\* \* \*

“Have you had any dinner?”

I blinked. My vision was cloudy. Awkwardly I rubbed my eyes, and tried to pay attention. I was sitting in a chair by Rowan's kitchen table. Oh, I was an ungracious sod—I'd cried myself to a standstill, and as soon as I'd finished, begun pushing him away. He'd let me go easily, hoisted me up to sit here. My head was full of grey cotton wool. “Dinner?”

He was standing by the sink, running water into a pan. He shot me an amused glance over one shoulder. “Food. Evening meal. You Geordies sometimes call it your tea, God knows why.”

“Oh. No, but...”

“This'll take about a half an hour to make. If I were you I'd go and have a bath. There's loads of hot water.”

Maybe I was still unconscious on his kitchen floor. Or maybe Maric's thugs had got me after all, and I'd died on the Bigg Market cobbles unmourned. I hauled myself onto my feet. “Rowan... Thanks, but I can't stay. I can't just...” *Can't just go off for a nice bath before dinner, like I lived*

*here, like you'd welcomed me home after a tough day at work. "I should go."*

"If you want. Tea is spaghetti bolognese. There's some jeans and a shirt on the bed, if you want a change of clothes."

I needed one. My own were clammy with sweat. I smelled of back alleys and despair. I could either stand here, trying to work out what the fuck had just happened to me, or I could go and have a bath. My eyes were swollen, my sinuses blocked. God alone knew what I looked like. "I've got to go," I repeated, then I turned and stumbled off down the corridor to the bathroom.

I switched the taps on full. The sound helped blank out my thoughts, and the tub filled quickly. He was right—there were cascades of hot, unlike the grudging supply that made its way against the laws of nature to my top-floor flat. I stripped out of my clothes, still not thinking. The steaming water looked good, that was all. The pain in my back had sunk to its usual dull throb. A bath would help, and then I would be able to cope, regain my balance, become once more the unlovely hard-nosed bastard who could walk out of here and carry on his life.

I didn't put on his clothes afterwards. The intimacy of that was beyond me, and I didn't want to find out I'd lost so much weight and muscle tone that his things would fit. The dressing gown I'd borrowed before was on the bed too. That would do for the time it would take me to thank him—properly this time, with the grace his kindness deserved—explain to him once more the gulf between a copper and a civilian, get dressed and out of here.

He was setting out plates on the kitchen table. Savoury smells were drifting from the pan. He smiled when he saw me. "Is that a bit better?"

"Yeah, much. I'm sorry I..." I hardly knew where to begin. He'd swept up, but there was still a damp patch on the wall. "I'm sorry I pitched such a fit. I don't know what happened."

"You were in pain. It just got too much for you."

His simple explanations were attractive. In that light, maybe I wasn't a hysterical lunatic who needed be ashamed to show his face. "I don't always cry and throw things."

"Maybe you should." He opened a cupboard door. "Here. I got these after I was beaten up. They're just over-the-counter, non-opioid." Why

would he think I needed to know that? He held out the foil strip to me, along with a sheet of pharmacy details. “Knock a couple back if they won't react with anything else you're taking. They're strong.”

There were glasses and a carafe of iced water on the table. I realised that the opiate remark had been about him, not me. I was in the house of an ex-user, and he was offering me pills. I popped one out of the packet without looking too closely, a tiny gesture of faith. “That route of yours out the back—do you use it often?”

“No. I just like knowing it's there.”

“You said you kept an eye on me. You mean... you looked out for me?”

“Yeah. Not very well, as it turns out, but I knew when your shifts ended, when you might come by.”

I turned to face him. My dressing gown wasn't properly fastened: I attended to that quickly, pulling the cord tight. “Why?” I sounded desperate, and I felt it too, though about what I wasn't sure.

“Well—why do you think?” He had come to a halt between the table and the oven, a tea towel clenched in his hands. “I liked what happened the other night. I didn't want to let you go.”

“I thought you weren't bothered.”

“What was I gonna do? Bar the door?”

A reverberant silence fell. We stared at each other, locked in place. I took a step towards him, having to break the paralysis. “I couldn't stop thinking about you.”

We collided midway, so hard it knocked the breath from me. His first grab was a steadying one, then he glanced into my face as if for permission, cupped my jaw between his hands and kissed me.

I'd forgotten the power of that. No—I'd shoved aside the memory, because even after everything else we'd done, that first contact had shone in my mind, dazzling, wiping out the typescript on my paperwork. His tongue a hot pressure against mine, asking me for my response... I gave it, shuddering, bearing him back, almost knocking him into the cooker. I tore out of the kiss. “Mind your pans!”

“What? Oh, yeah—hang on and I'll turn them off.”

“What about the spag bol?”

“It'll keep. Don't let me go.”

I didn't. I held him round his skinny waist while he switched off the hobs, followed him, kissing the back of his neck, while he pulled down the blind to cover the kitchen window. "What are you doing that for? We'll go through into..."

"No. We'll stay here."

I gasped. He was clutching at the edge of the sink, his spine moving sinuously against my belly. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. Ah, Vince, yes—if you could..."

I didn't need ask him what. He was unfastening his jeans. That was my job—I pushed his hands away and unbuttoned him, lifting his heavy shaft as it surged out of his briefs. *If I could...* I didn't know. My sudden full-throttle erection said yes, but how would it be when I tried to thrust, get inside him? The painkillers were good, or maybe excitement was blocking the signals. I couldn't even climb through a window without collapsing. "I want to."

"Then do it. I'll brace for you. Just move slow."

"What about—"

"One in your dressing-gown pocket. And..." He snaked out an arm and grabbed a bottle of olive oil off a shelf. "Here. Improvise."

I choked with laughter. He had to be kidding. I'd loved a spontaneous stand-up fuck with Jack, but that had been a million years ago, when I was still... *When I was still a man*, a cold voice whispered, and I shuddered in denial, some of my rage flooding back to me. "No!"

"Yes. Do it, Vince. Fuck me."

I unwrapped the condom with unsteady fingers. I poured the green-gold oil into my palm. He was standing propped against the sink, open and ready for me. He cried out when I entered him but didn't move, setting himself like a rock. All I had to do was lean into him, let myself fall forward, slowly up and in. I closed my hands on his hips: pushed his clothes down further so I could get to him, took hold of his cock with one hand and closed my free arm tight round his waist. "Oh, lover."

"Yeah. God, you're so big. So fucking good."

I pushed, and he rocked back against me. The movement brought me full-length inside him. He gave a high-pitched wail, barely audible, arching his head until his soft hair brushed my shoulder. He met my next thrust too, and the next, keeping my pace so that I barely had to work at it, and pain

was light-years out, somebody else's bad dream. Muscles I hadn't used in months bunched in my buttocks and thighs, their contraction delicious. God, I could fuck him—I could still do this, forge this hot link with another human being, please him, love him. I lightly bit the junction of his neck and shoulder, flicked my tongue against his ear. He was rigid in my hand now, clear liquid from his tip wetting my fingers. “You're there,” I breathed. “Come for me.”

“Not yet. Not yet. Please don't let me.”

I had a trick for that. I squeezed his shaft tight round its throbbing base, cutting off the surge. He writhed, groaning, and lost his rhythmic push against me. “Ah, God! Sorry!”

“Don't. You're fine. You're... fucking perfect.” I laid into him with all my strength. I folded him over the sink, letting him have it as I would have in that other life. I couldn't feel a thing but wild, high pleasure, a vibe in my blood and my balls that was the song of life itself. I was a conduit again, delivering, giving. I undid my grasp and he shot instantly, jetting against the sink and over my hand. Clamped tight to his back, I let his climax be the trigger for my own, coming into the storm of convulsion in the muscles of his arse—drove into him again and again until he turned to limp exhausted sweetness in my arms, and I was done too, grabbing at the sink to keep myself from falling.

He turned before that could happen. I slipped out of him awkwardly, making both of us groan, but he was so quick and strong. He got his arms round me before my knees could give way. “Come on through here, love.” I clung to him blindly, moving when he directed me. I still didn't hurt but I couldn't keep my feet under me. I was warmly numb from nape to tailbone. Nothing worked, but nothing had to—I was in his arms, and there was his big sofa, worn green velvet like the chairs in the turret room. It called me like a sunny field. I lay down when he told me to, but I didn't let him go when he told me to do that. I heard something about dinner—the spag bol for tea—then his rush of surrendering laughter, and his weight came down on me, warm as a big cat's. There was room for both of us. I rolled him to lie at my side, pushing an arm beneath his head. I wrapped my arms around him. His brow went down on my shoulder, and I felt a sudden dampness there, and a shudder in his body like sobs. What was he crying for? I was too far gone to find out, but I held him, burying one hand in his hair.

\* \* \*

The pasta was beyond saving. The cold bolognese was delicious, though, eaten straight from pan on the table between us. We were barely awake. Our shoulders pressed together where we sat. I drew the line when he teasingly threatened to feed me—there had to be some trace left to me of my shell, my carapace of big tough cop—but I never really surfaced, and when he yawned and seemed in danger of falling asleep into the pan, I ruffled his hair and stood up, extending a hand. “Come on, bonny lad. Off to bed.”

I thought I would crash out again the moment I lay down, but I had pushed my luck and my limits pretty hard, and a warning tug in my sacrum brought me back from the brink. Rowan had curled up beside me in the bed and was already breathing deeply, occasional flickers of movement in his long fingers, curling the corner of his mouth into a smile. It was a long time since I'd managed to shag someone out like that. I got up, careful not to disturb him. I didn't mind a bit of pain, not now, but it would make me restive, and I might be better sitting up. I could sleep in the armchair he had occupied during my first night here.

A loose sheaf of papers lay beside the chair. I wouldn't have touched them, but they were large, A3 size, the lines on them striking, hard to miss.

Familiar, too. I stopped short. Stiffly I bent and picked the top sheet up. It was a charcoal sketch of a man lying asleep on the bed, face down and naked. He had been conjured in just a few strokes, but they were beautiful. The man was beautiful. It took me long seconds to accept that it was me.

Could Rowan possibly see me like that? The drawing was realistic. He had accurately noted my surgical scar. He hadn't flattered me, but the overall effect was attractive, powerful. I remembered him admiring my backside. That had been good to hear, since no-one else had shown interest in it in months, but did I really have those compact curves? My face heating under a blush, I glanced at myself sidelong in the mirror, shrugging the dressing down off my shoulders and letting it fall. God, in this light, guided by his perceptions, I could almost see it. Being handled like meat by doctors and burly male nurses had skewed my self-image, but there I was—the man from Rowan's drawing, battered but alive, and—yes—possessed of a fairly nice arse.

What struck me hardest was the affection with which the sketches had been done. I sat down in the armchair. I couldn't remember deserving it. We'd had three encounters, two of which had turned into thoughtless, starvation-need sex. I hadn't been nice to him. He knew I'd still have him dragged off into a courtroom if I could. I sat down, turning over one sketch after another. The artist liked this man. Without prior knowledge—if I'd seen the drawings as a stranger—I'd have said he loved him.

I remembered how he'd caught my wrist in the alley, that sudden warm grasp. I'd been pissed off with him, of course—he'd spoiled my fight. Now, though, in the room's small-hours quiet, I acknowledged an inner shift. I'd been bloody glad to find him in the shadows beside me. I'd run with him like a wolf with its mate, heart thudding hotly with pleasure in spite of my pain. And in the kitchen, when I'd come back from the bathroom, when he'd turned round smiling and drying his hands to look at me...

No. Not just sex. Not just a copper after his witness. I set the charcoal sketches down. I went back to the bed and got in beside him. He shifted in his sleep and settled against me. His arm went round my waist as if it always did. He sighed and rubbed his brow against my chest, as if that was just how we slept.

I couldn't love a stranger, especially not this one. I held him and stared up into the painted night sky, trying to lose myself in it as completely as I felt lost here on Earth.



## Chapter Eight

When I woke up, Rowan was sitting cross-legged on the bed. I had the feeling he'd been there for some time. I knew from the drawings that he watched me while I slept. That was something I'd have thought would freak me out, but instead I found myself liking it. Probably more about Rowan than me. I was discovering all kinds of things.

Morning light was filtering through the gauze curtain, and in its cold brilliance he looked at once younger and older than his years. His eyes were shadowed with anxiety. For the first time he seemed unsure of himself.

I could sympathise with that. "Hi," I said. I put out a hand to him, but his were clenched white-knuckled in his lap and he didn't respond. I managed to turn my own gesture into a tug at the duvet. Who were we this morning? Strangers from opposite sides of the fence who had seized another illicit fuck? Lovers, whatever the hell that meant? I tried to remember what normal people did, how they thought about their new acquaintance after this amount of drama and screwing. I supposed a normal man might say he had a boyfriend.

"Maric's trial happens at the end of this month, doesn't it?"

I hadn't expected that, but I tried to catch up. Maybe he'd had a change of heart. "That's right."

"And you don't think you'll get a conviction?"

I pushed up to sit against the headboard. "At this rate we'll be lucky if we get a trial." The stupid, ironic thing was that if he'd changed his mind, decided to testify, I'd now be reluctant to let him. I saw him alone in the witness box, getting hammered down under fire from Maric's lawyers. I saw him alone in the streets afterwards, looking over his shoulder, maybe for the rest of his life.

Then, he was doing that now. And maybe he wouldn't be alone. I closed my hand over his chilly, tight-clamped fist. "If we can't get a witness, he's going to walk."

"Yeah. And that would be bad, I know. But it's not him you want to watch out for, Vince, not really. It's Val Foster."

I sat up straight. Val Foster – Bill's real target in all of this. She'd brought Maric in from Eastern Europe and planted him here in Bill's city, as

she'd foisted dozens like him on other struggling, recession-hit towns where the only trades still flourishing were hers and the undertakers'. "Foster? What do you know about her?"

"She runs Maric. That's why being locked up hasn't really stopped him. That's why you lost your witnesses. She's giving you a great big demonstration of what happens when you try to kill the drugs trade in this town."

"Jesus, Rowan." I was suddenly cold. The central heating was set to its usual tropical blast, but gooseflesh was prickling along my arms. "I know she bloody runs Maric. How do *you* know?"

"Because she used to run me too."

"She what?"

He drew up his knees to his chest, fastened his arms around them. He looked as if he'd like to jump off the bed and put a world of distance between himself and his own words, as if he was holding himself still by desperate effort. Muscles rose painfully tight in his forearms. "That job I had with the museum, in acquisitions? It wasn't just good. It was the best. They sent me everywhere, paid me a fortune. I got in with a flash crowd of buyers and B-list celebs and European wild-child aristocracy, and... I didn't have a clue how to behave myself. I'd just got my fine-arts doctorate from Oxford. My family were Devonshire schoolteachers. I didn't have a clue."

I was listening. I'd heard every word, but I was caught up on the first seven. "Val Foster used to... *run* you?"

"Yeah. As a mule." He got that out as if it had been a lump of hot rock in his throat. "I got pissed one night and I let one of my mates put a packet of coke into my luggage. I nearly fucking died of fright at the airport, but my face wasn't on any records, and I got through. And that was it."

It would be. My mouth was parched, my voice flat and arid when I spoke. The story was easy—I'd heard it a million times before. "That was it. They blackmailed you into the next."

"Yeah. I've got no excuses. I could've turned myself in then, given my mate up too. It would've meant jail time, though, and I'd have lost my job. Lost everything. And... I didn't want to. I liked my life."

"So you made another run."

"I made another run, and this time it was heroin, and it wasn't in my suitcase. It was in... It was in me." He stopped dead, his eyes suddenly

closing. His shoulders heaved. A faint choked sound escaped him, and all I wanted to do was grab him up into my arms, hold him so hard his bones cracked. I wanted it not to be true. “I did it, and my mate told Val Foster I was good at it. She was just small-time back then, just starting out. I had a good face for it. Nobody questioned me. I... I shoved cocaine and heroin up my arse for her and brought it into Britain for six fucking months before I got caught.”

I swung my legs off the bed. A huge pang of blood-red pain went up my spine, but I barely noticed. I leaned my elbows on my knees, ran one hand over the back of my head. I stared at the beautiful sea-green rug. “But you did get caught.”

“Yes. And I did lose everything. The police offered me protection, a reduced sentence, if I testified. Is any of this sounding familiar?”

“What happened?”

“I couldn’t do it then, not any more than I can do it now for you. I skipped from the safe house they’d put me into. Then I ran.”

“Where to?”

“You already know. As hard and as far as I could. I changed my name, hid out in homeless shelters, hitched my way up four hundred miles of country until I reached this ballbreaking freezer of a city, and I got my little handyman’s job at the Langring.” He paused, and I felt the mattress shift, as if he had thought of touching me then changed his mind. When he went on, he sounded lifeless, cold. “At least I was clean. And being poor kept me that way. Mostly, anyway. I fell off the wagon for a week one time, and... I decorated the flat.”

“What made you start using?” The question was urgent to me. Plenty of kids had good reason, not that I’d ever listened to any. Broken homes, abusive parents... *Come on, Rowan. Pull one of those out of closet.* “Was it just the celebs and the brat-pack?”

“Not even them. At least—they gave me the stuff, but I used it of my own accord. There’s something inside some people, you know? Something just waiting, and it doesn’t know what for until it gets it.” A week ago I’d have denied this. Now I thought about the pills I’d flushed down the bog, and I shut up, bowing my head. “The first time I took heroin, I woke up in a Paris hotel room with a lad I’d never seen before and... all the walls covered in paintings like these. I thought he’d done them. I thought the hotel would

sue me, but they liked it. They still tell American tourists that Van Gogh stayed there.”

I could have laughed. If I started, though, I'd have wept, or punched a hole through the painted walls. “They're after you now, aren't they? Val Foster's gang. That's why you're so afraid.”

“Yes. When she set Maric up with his operation here, she moved some of her cronies in with him, people I'd used to know. They must have seen me around. It was just dumb luck that I'd ended up living in this building. After the Chinese kids were murdered here, I knew I wouldn't be left alone for long. God – like they had anything to worry about from me! Like I hadn't run to the ends of the earth already to keep their dirty secrets for them. But then your lot started to take an interest in me, so they beat me up anyway, just as a reminder.”

“And that was all? They left you alone after that?”

“Yeah. I thought... maybe I'd be okay. I wouldn't have to move on again. But then you came here, didn't you? And that first night...” Again came that shift of the mattress, and this time he did touch, just the brush of his fingertips to my nape. “The first night you were here, I looked out the window and I saw her. Val Foster, just hanging around across the street. I had to stop you from leaving.”

*And dragging me off to bed was the easiest way.* “Val Foster? You're not telling me the methamphetamine queen came here in person to scare me.”

“No. You were secondary. But I think I'm the only one she ever lost, the only one who wriggled out of her net. She doesn't like to lose control of anyone. She wanted to show me her face. I didn't want her to get to know yours.”

When I thought about how easily I'd fallen, what a fucking pushover I'd been, I felt sick enough to die. I'd been so lonely, so cold. Anybody's for a touch, a kiss, a brush of my own bloody jersey across my face. “Well, you sure as shit kept her from seeing it. Was that the only reason?”

He didn't answer. God, I'd have sworn that he would—denied it in a flash of that hot temper I knew lay beneath his calm. Kicked me out of his bed for the implication. Instead of that, he got out, his movement for once as clumsy as my own. He stumbled on his way to the dresser, took out a pair of jeans in unsteady hands and pulled them on. “Listen to me,” he said, his face turned away from me. “Drop this case. Those thugs who cornered

you last night work for Foster, not Maric. If they're on to you, you're screwed. And... this is too big for this town, for your pissy little drug squad. The Met couldn't handle Val Foster. They'll kill you next time."

"Why don't you leave me to decide what my pissy little squad can do?"

"Because you can't. You've got no idea. If Foster's moved up here, you've lost your drugs war in Newcastle."

I surged to my feet. I had my temper too, and I'd heard enough. "I got shot in that war, you bastard. If I've lost anything, it's because of people like you—crackheads who bring your filth into the country, then don't have the spine to try and make it right."

"Jesus." His voice broke. He still wouldn't look at me. He was shrugging into his crumpled shirt from the day before, tearing at the buttons. "I never dealt. I carried the stuff, and I used it, but I never pushed."

"It's a fine bloody distinction."

"It's not!" His head jerked up, and he met my gaze full on, his own hot with rage, tears spilling. "It's the difference between destroying myself and other grown-up morons like me, and standing around in back alleys behind schools! And you know what else? I don't even give a fuck. I'd trade everything I've got now—my little earthworm life, burrowing around in the dark, glueing together other people's paintings—for one more hit." He gestured at the beautiful entwined couple who continued their embrace over his bed, oblivious to pain. "For one more chance to paint like that—even if I did get hooked again."

"Then why don't you? Why not just go the fuck ahead?" He stared at me in silence, and a miserable ache of guilt rose in my chest. I hated him—everything he stood for, everything he was saying. But he hadn't had to come out and drag me off the streets the night before. He hadn't had to share his flat and his body and his bed, or try to feed me cold pasta sauce out of a pan. "You don't only paint when you're stoned," I said roughly. "I... I saw your sketches. The ones you did of me."

"Those? They're nothing. I'm a decent technical draughtsman. Those were just an exercise. Meaningless."

I got dressed. I wasn't sure how I managed it. He must have helped me, though the room seemed hazy, my thoughts and my vision a blur. He vanished into the bathroom, and he brought me back my clothes, so putting together those actions, yes, that was him helping me. He'd helped me from

the moment he'd seen Val Foster in the street outside, and if I could ever forgive him for that, I might feel less like shoving him out through his rococo window and taking the leap myself straight after. I could admit it now, now it was all fucked and over—I'd started to love Rowan Clyde.

And there was a thought. "You changed your name?"

"Yeah. For all the good it did me."

"Then you're not..." This was ridiculous. It was fine for *him* to cry. He damn well should, all things considered. I pulled my T-shirt over my head, and before I emerged, I managed to swipe its fabric quickly over my eyes. "You're not Rowan Clyde."

"Of course I'm not. What kind of a stupid name is that?"

"Right. Do me a favour—just... don't tell me the real one." I stopped for a moment in the doorway. I wouldn't look back. "I'll have to put in a report about Val Foster."

"I know. That's why I told you—so you'd understand who you were dealing with. So your boss would know to back off."

"There's no chance of that. I won't back off either."

"What do you mean?"

"I want this bitch."

"Yeah, I know." He was watching me in alarm, as if he'd just snipped the wrong wire on an explosive. "But you're not fit enough... If your mob sets anything up and goes out after her, you wouldn't be a part of that."

"No. And thanks for the reminder of how screwed I am. Still doesn't mean I'm gonna sit at home."

"Oh, Jesus, Vince. Don't try anything stupid."

"What does it matter to you? I'm a cop. You're an addict. We should both get the hell back to what we do best."

Too much. I might as well have punched him in the gut. He folded up as if I had; sank down onto the edge of the bed. But I couldn't take it back, and if I was a cop again, I owed him one more thing. "If you've got this history with Foster, my boss will probably get you protection. Witness or not."

"Why?"

"He's decent. That's why."

The hollow shadows deepened under Rowan's eyes. I'd put enough knife-blade emphasis on that word *decent* to leave him in no doubt of the differences I perceived. "It doesn't matter," he said lifelessly, looking at the

floor. “Tell your boss whatever you want – about Foster, about me. I’m leaving town. I’ll be gone.”

## Chapter Nine

No chance at all of Bill Hodges backing off, not once he'd heard Val Foster had opened her campaign in his town. Quite the reverse. I stood in a corner of the briefing room, watching the special-operations officers pouring in to take their seats. Some were local, some drafted in from other cities where Foster had left her mark. Two had come up from the Met, a pair of Geordie lads made good. Nobody told me to my face, but I gathered soon enough they'd filled the gap Jack and I had left in the recruitment programme. They were nice, very modest and focussed. I could tell from the set of their shoulders how blazingly proud they were to have made the Flying Squad and come back to fight for their home town.

I had done my part. So Bill had assured me, anyway. He'd listened in disbelief while I'd told him Goran Maric was little more than a shield and a symbol for Val Foster. I'd heard him on the phone to the chief inspector afterwards. He was struggling for vocabulary. The words hadn't been invented for the likes of Val. Drugs baroness? Queenpin? Overlady? He was lit up like a Christmas tree, and he didn't care, as he told me again and again, where I'd got my information from. I never had to mention Rowan's name, and just as well, since that too was just a smokescreen, a façade. He sent out his troops—the able-bodied ones—to confirm my story, and then he put out the call. Staff and resources he couldn't have dreamt of while this was just the Goran Maric case came flooding in overnight. He was proud of me, he said. I'd adapted to my new circumstances, changed my street skills to investigative ones, and look at the results! I could sit back. I'd be welcome at the briefings as an intel man, but the special-ops lads, firearms officers and drugs teams would take over the legwork now.

He couldn't have told me any more politely to keep out of the way. I appreciated his care for my dignity, and I leaned on the wall and let him get on with what he did best. Logistics was his speciality. He knew exactly where to send people and when. If he couldn't find a place for me, that wasn't his fault. I hadn't really adapted. I'd struck gold this once, under circumstances which would give him a stroke if he found out. I listened for an hour or so while he detailed out the ops and the surveillance he wanted put in place around the city, then I backed out and went home. I'd started



early. It was almost my knocking-off time anyway. If anyone noticed I was gone, it wouldn't cause much grief.

When I got back to the flat, for the first time since I'd moved in, I hauled out from under the sofa my one family photo album. I'd stuffed it under there because Phil was in most of the shots, bugging up even the blandest of family memories. A picnic on the beach where he'd disappeared and we'd found him hours later, passed out in the dunes with a nicked bottle of scotch still clutched in his hand. My sister Jane's sixteenth, which he'd honoured by pinching her new bracelet before she'd had a chance to try it on. I looked through the pictures. For once I didn't rest my thumb on his ugly face, which I could see now would have been my own, if I too had stumbled off the track. I'd always denied it, but we had been very alike.

I put the album away. I gave myself half an hour to look out the window, watching the little world. Things which had seemed real enough through Rowan's glass had retreated back into miniature, an ingenious Lego and enamel-work scene laid out for reasons unknown. Tiny cars threaded the hollow beneath my building. Sunlight caught their roofs, and fragile stick-men darted between them at the crossing. Rowan's hometown from the gallery came and went, and he didn't appear. Well, he'd said he would be skipping town. For some reason I hadn't thought he'd meant straight away, that he wouldn't finish out his week at the gallery. I started to wonder where he'd gone, and I stopped myself. He was nothing to me now. And he'd be safe enough, whichever new alleys he'd found to run down. He'd done it all before. His type would always get by. Fear twisted in my guts, and a bitter anger that wouldn't let me stay still for one moment longer. I'd told Rowan that I wouldn't back down, wouldn't sit at home. Beyond that, my ideas were foggy, but I had to do something.

I would stay out of Bill's way. I owed him that much. He didn't need a wounded warhorse limping round the place, though when I'd adjusted that grandiose metaphor down to the level of a worn-out pit pony I felt better. Now I'd seen and remembered the raw energy of a citywide op being harnessed at Mansion Street, I realised just how far I'd fallen from that world. I'd made life very tough for my boss over the last few months. I'd never be a desk jock, never get my head around diplomacy, interviews and PR. My desperate clutch on my old life hadn't been fair, not on Bill and not

on myself. It was time for me to move on. I had no idea of how to word a resignation letter, but I could worry about that later.

Before I walked out, maybe I could render one final service to Bill and the pissy little department that had been my whole world since I'd left the Ponteland academy. When I'd hit the streets before in my hoodie and cheap trackie bottoms, I'd been after Goran Maric. I'd had no reason to try out on the back-alley crackheads what the name of Val Foster would do.

I laughed, the sound harsh in the empty room. Rowan would tell me it would simply get me killed. I'd have listened to him, too. The night before his confession, safe in his bed, I might even have let him stop me.

I scrambled up off the sofa. There was no time like the present, and kamikaze tasks were best carried out in hot blood. The important thing now was to shift my arse out of this flat and into action before I could realise I was gutted. Heartbroken at being dumped out of an affair I hadn't really known had begun. The sharpest sting lay in his name—in not knowing it, in accepting him completely as my Rowan. I didn't even know how to think about him any more.

*Accepting him.* I stopped in my bedroom, resting one hand on the wardrobe where I kept my street disguise. I hadn't done that, any more than I'd accepted Phil. I hadn't had to walk out the other morning, leaving him to cope with his bared soul as best he could. I shook myself. Christ, one more second of this and I'd have to admit that any dumping had been done by me, not him. I pulled out my clothes, slammed the wardrobe door on my thumb—stood and swore until I'd run out of breath and bad language. Then I quite calmly got dressed. Out of habit I paused in the hallway, switching on the kitchen light so I wouldn't come back to a dark flat. I glanced around my featureless domain. Deliberately I switched the light off again, and I let myself out, closing this door quietly behind me.

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I hadn't thought much of my chances, but I failed so fast and thoroughly it would have made a cat laugh. My first stop was with an old snitch of mine. All I asked him to do was keep his nose alert for any scents that might lead to the new big dog in town, a lady by name of Val Foster. Fergy was his genial self, nodding agreement, pocketing my tenner with his usual

lordly grace, as if he'd won it off me on the turf at Ascot. And by the time I was halfway down the road from his squat, a black Ford Mondeo was kerb-crawling me, keeping a bare three feet off my heels. I didn't let it worry me. Fergy's neighbourhood had been my old beat patch. I knew every cracked paving stone and lamp post. I let my new friends tail me, keeping an eye on their moving reflection in the windows across the street. They were trying for inconspicuous. Nice of me to let them think it had worked. I passed one alley, the obvious one to duck up in time of need. The next houses had a low wall. It was only knee high. Even in my current state I could hop up onto it and stroll along, the heedless junkie version of myself, hands in my pockets, whistling. Probably I had just scored. That was why most people visited Fergy. At the end of the block the wall rose to meet a fence, a nasty job with anti-climb paint and barbed wire along the top. It wouldn't be a pretty vault, but the terrace was a long one, and provided I landed in one piece, at least I'd be rid of the car.

The engine growled. I should have taken that as a warning. But this was a public street, albeit a grim one, and I thought that might give me a chance—kids and grannies and dogs, and no place to drive like a nutcase.

The Mondeo snarled and swept round me, smashing its wing and left headlight into the wall. The cut-off was perfect. Angle, distance, element of surprise. I was certainly fucking surprised. Before I could pivot and try for a retreat, the back doors swung open, disgorging two of the lovely lads who had cornered me between the alleyway bins. The third was behind the wheel. This time I skipped the jeers and provocations. I had no exit, no nick-of-time mate to save me now. I waded in.

I did some damage going down. Blood sprayed the Mondeo's window and one of the bruisers fell back, clutching his nose. I spun round for my next man, but he'd turned into three. I hadn't seen their front-seat passenger. Nice that they'd felt the need to bring along an extra. I couldn't imagine causing them that much trouble. Maybe I was wrong, though—two of them seized my arms, and I was tugged upright to face the third. He looked at me consideringly. “You've given us the runaround, haven't you? You and little Rowan.”

I thought I'd surrendered. The name made me lurch and start to fight again. “Leave him out of this,” I rasped. “He's clean. He's not gonna talk or give you up, any more than he did last time.”

The thug pulled a gun. It was a great big shameless Walther. Val Foster really didn't give a shit, did she? Even Maric wouldn't have tried a broad-daylight hit in a residential area. "You don't have to worry about Rowan any more."

Sick fear went through me, then a hopelessness like nothing I'd ever felt before. "You'd better get on with it," I said. "I'm not bothered. I've been shot by bigger things than that."

He played with me a bit. He rested the muzzle on my brow, clicked the safety off. He put his head on one side and examined me, and when I stared mutely back, gave up the game. He re-set the catch, but adjusted his hold so that the base of the grip became the weapon, not the tight black muzzle. "Nothing so easy for you, Vince. You've been making waves. My boss doesn't like waves. Now she wants to talk to you."

No amateur ideas about holding the gun by the barrel, then. Only in bad Westerns did a pistol-whipping work like that. My new friend nodded to the lads behind me, and they pushed my head down.

The blow came like a hammer-strike. Almost enough to put me straight out, but I had a second, on hands and knees in the gutter, to see that the first lad I'd punched was still sprawled across the kerb. It gave me an instant's satisfaction. The gun came down again, and I dropped into bright scarlet void.

\* \* \*

The light was cool and grey. I knew it well. Anyone who'd grown up in a river city would know it, and I lay for a long time, watching its dance on the walls. Water-light on concrete. I could smell the river—oil and exhaust and tidal exhalations, seaweedy and rank. I tried to bring this all together, place myself, but a patch of graffiti morphed into one of Rowan's painted men, and he stepped out of the wall to crouch by me, stroking my hair.

The next time I woke I did better. Water and petrol meant a riverside car park, and I could just see the angle of a ramp, a cracked green exit sign. The recession had left plenty of these in its wake, gaunt concrete multistoreys marked for demolition then abandoned as regeneration projects failed. This couldn't be our ugliest, most famous example, the 1970s block where they'd filmed *Get Carter*—that one finally had come down a couple of summers

ago, amid a public outcry. I'd almost missed the brutal thing myself, not that I'd gone so far as to collect a fragment for my mantelpiece.

Still, I wasn't far away. The skyline was right. The angle told me I was in a basement level. Also that I was lying on my side, reaching my conclusions through a narrow strip of daylight between one floor and the next. My hands and feet were bound, my wrists caught painfully behind my back in the grip of what felt like gaffer tape. Yes—I was having trouble breathing because my nose had bled and there was a strip of the same stuff across my mouth.

*Shit.* I closed my eyes and tried to think. I'd been abducted. Val Foster wanted to talk to me. Yeah, right. She was scared stiff of a broken small-town cop and wanted to negotiate. Far more likely she'd told the Mondeo Four to give me a good fright and dump me some place where I'd never be found. Eventually the builders would knock down the car park on top of my bones, and I'd present a nice find for some thirty-first century archaeologist. Shifting, I tested the strength of my bonds. Why did nobody ever use rope these days? The tape was a bitch, thin but strong and hard to fight.

I was lost. My stunned indifference melted. I gritted my teeth against a rush of fear and sorrow. Forcibly I calmed my breathing—I would suffocate, if I let go the panting sobs trying to claw up out of my lungs. What the fuck was wrong with me? I hadn't even begun my fight to get out of here. A shard of wire for the tape was where I should start—wire, glass, a ragged edge of concrete, anything would do.

But moving would hurt. I didn't care enough to try. At last my aching head caught up with its own subconscious processes. I wasn't worried about having been dumped down here. That was just a natural consequence, the fate I'd tempted by going out solo after Maric and Foster in turn. No. What I belatedly cared about was a warm summer night six months ago. *You fucking bastard, Jack*, my gagged mouth screamed, silenced as completely now as it had been then by blood loss and disbelief. *You ran! Other gunmen, my arse—you lied in your debrief, and you sat by my hospital bed and lied some more, and you pissed off halfway round the world rather than stop lying and just bloody face me. You made me doubt my sanity and self-worth until I sought out my suicide missions. Until I welcomed the crack of a pistol-butt on the back of my skull.*

Footsteps scraped on the concrete. I couldn't sob or yell but I'd been managing small bestial noises, blood running down the back of my throat, and I couldn't shut up in time. A boot jabbed hard into my spine—a boot with a very sharp toe. “Fuck's sake, Rowan,” a female voice said, acid with disgust. “I thought you said this one was *tough*.”

## Chapter Ten

Val Foster looked quite ordinary. I supposed if she'd had horns, a demon tail, and *get your crack here* tattooed across her brow, she wouldn't have slipped so quietly into my city and taken up residence there. She was about thirty, her dark hair pulled back in a pony tail. She was small and slight but clear-skinned, one of the rare-breed dealers who had made their fortunes without ever touching the goods. They were the dangerous ones. A user, no matter how infrequent, would slip up. Foster looked as if she'd never put a foot wrong in her life.

She was a legend. In a way, I couldn't believe I was meeting her. I wished to God Bill Hodges could be here. I sat bolt upright in the chair where I'd been hoisted and dumped by her heavies, trying to regulate my breathing. I wouldn't take my eyes off her. Snake as she was, I could cope with her. Not the dark-eyed shadow a few feet behind her left shoulder, arms folded miserably over his chest, head down. I wouldn't look there.

"Val, you'd better take the gag off him."

She turned to glance at the shadow. "No. I'm not done looking at him yet."

I didn't know what there was to see. But her grey gaze had been raking me over with as much interest as I felt in her.

"His nose is bleeding. He *is* tough. He wouldn't tell you if he was suffocating."

She smiled. It was quite a nice smile, actually—I could imagine her deploying it for customs officials and passport control. "Go on, then," she said. "Well, I'm not touching him! He's a fucking mess."

Rowan stood over me. I'd have told him, had I been able to speak, that a good rip was the best way with gaffer tape. It would take a bit of skin with it but slow tender tugs would be agony, and since we'd come this far, since he'd crossed the divide and sold me out to his buddies, he need not scruple about causing me a bit of pain. I couldn't read his face. He was like a fading photo of himself a thousand miles away. His eyes were wide and lost, their focus fixed on some point disorientingly just beyond mine. If I hadn't been trussed like a chicken, despite everything I'd have reached out and taken his hand.

“Hadn't you better explain to him first?”

He started as if he'd forgotten Foster's presence. “What?”

“Your little speech. When you came crawling home to us, you were adamant that once we got Vince you wanted to talk to him. You wanted to explain.”

I tried to sit back. I tried to convey, by the tiny movements allowed to me and a lift of my eyebrows, that this would be very interesting, that I couldn't wait. But suddenly my airway was too constricted with swelling and blood for me to breathe past the gag any more, and I convulsed, choking. Rowan grabbed my shoulder. He tore off the tape in one move: hoisted me far enough forward in the chair that I could cough my lungs clear. That was nice of him, but his proximity, his touch, was like burns from a chemical fire, worse than the ripped-up sting across my mouth. I gasped and spat blood until I could speak. “Get your hands off me, you little shit.”

Val Foster laughed. “Told you you should have explained first. Give him a minute, Vince. He really wants you to know.”

I didn't care. There was nothing in the world Rowan could tell me that could possibly make any difference. He didn't look as if he cared too much either. His voice was like dead leaves, and he'd resumed his desolate self-embrace, eyes fixed once more on the floor. “I wanted to say,” he began, “I did try. Meeting you made a difference. But you have to understand—I've done all this before. Held out against them, I mean, or tried to. It's no good, Vince. They get you in the end. It's easier to run with the wolves than... than be devoured by them.”

That was the end of the speech. I didn't think he expected a reply. I wasn't sure he'd even have gone through with it without Foster's prompting: he was standing with rag-doll indifference, waiting to be sent off-stage. And that was a point. Val Foster hadn't brought me here to give me tea and nice little cakes on a doily. An ugly scene was in the offing. “You bloody idiot,” I said, a lot less harshly than I'd intended. “They've devoured you anyway. And you've fed me to them too.” I had to stop for a moment. My throat was raw. “Hoi. Your ladyship. Val. You want me to talk, don't you? I know we're gonna do the thing.”

“That's right.” She was a nice cool hand at any rate. Nothing worse than amateurs... “I moved into a peaceful city here, Vince. You had your



problems, your crack dens and your Goran Marics, but nothing much. And all your policing was small-scale to match. I slipped in like a ghost. Everything was fine. Then suddenly, no more than forty eight hours ago, everything starts to go to shit. Everywhere I turn, someone's watching. All the supply lines I'd been putting in place, all the runners... Obstacles, problems. Then your Rowan turns up here, and after a bit of persuasion he admits he might have mentioned my name to his new copper boyfriend." She put her hands on her hips and came to stand close to me, her head on one side. It was hard to be scared of her, though I knew I should be bricking it by now. "So yes, we have to do the thing. Unless you want to save us both the bother. I'll take whatever you know—details of ops you've got planned, placement of your undercover lads, that kind of thing. Also..." She stretched out one booted foot and dug that sharp toe into the concrete, twisting it suggestively. "Also, I know our Goran Maric's talked. That wasn't smart of him. I don't know how much he's said, but I bet you do, Detective Sergeant."

I smiled. It hurt like hell. "Go screw yourself."

Her cold hand cracked across my face. She hadn't intended more than a cuff, a reproof. Her expression of mild amusement hadn't altered. "Got a bit of a death wish, haven't you?"

"Maybe. Do me a favour—get that kid out of here."

"Rowan? Why?"

I gritted my teeth. "Treacherous bastard's already heard enough."

She broke into laughter. "Oh, nice try. Don't waste any pity on him—he sold you out. Don't let him hide from the results." She turned away from me. Far off on my vision's periphery, silhouetted like Stonehenge monoliths against the light, the Mondeo Four were awaiting their instructions. She made a sharp gesture, snapping her fingers. "You lot! Come over here."

\* \* \*

I couldn't take them seriously. That was the trouble, during the first part of their routine anyway. I now had such a broad experience of pain that their efforts to inflict more on me bounced off the shields I'd built inside. And then there was simple comparison. Knuckledusters being smacked into my jaw, however sincerely, couldn't match a bullet to the spine, or any of

the torture-garden experiences of the hospital months that had followed. My daily life could make a beating pale to nothing, really. I'd packed in the morphine dope after my last night with Rowan, switched to his over-the-counter brand, and they were good, but if I slipped or missed a step and jarred myself... Well, the efforts of a blank-eyed gorilla were enough to make me laugh, that was all, and after a moment I did, throwing my head back, the sound barking harshly off the concrete walls.

“Jesus, Vince! Don't!”

I twisted round to see Rowan. He was standing where he'd been told to stand, watching as he'd been ordered. I'd blanked him out from my scene. His eyes were fathomless with horror. I wanted to tell him there was no need—that this was nursery stuff, coercion for beginners. *I thought you said this Foster woman was some kind of big deal...*

“He's favouring his back,” she said suddenly. The observation was very quiet. She didn't shift from her idle slouch against the wall, but she focussed like a stoat homing in on a mouse. “When you hit him, that's where he's bracing. Sit him forward. Get his shirt up—let me see.”

Her neat, hard little paws probed my spine—triumphantly zeroed in on the place where the bullet was lodged. I doubled up in my seat, a thug clutching me by the scruff, as if I could bloody well go anywhere.

I couldn't bear it. I broke. I gave her chapter and verse on the Mansion Street drug squad. I told her what Maric had said, what Bill Hodges knew about her operation, exactly when and where he intended to join battle with her. I went into detail. I wished it hadn't been sobbed out between great raw gasps and pleas for her to stop, but she'd found her way into me.

The fact that it was all a pile of steaming bollocks made me feel slightly better. Released, sliding off the chair, I tried to calculate how long I'd get before she found out. A few hours tops—I'd said the first op was at dawn, and sadly for me, Bill had a raid booked for just after midnight. She and her heavies were striding off. I fought to stay conscious. My hands and my feet were still tied. If I hit the floor like a sack of potatoes now, God knew what would happen to that embedded bullet. It felt loose inside me, floating. My guts and kidneys too felt awash, as if they'd been dislodged. I wished my cries of pain had been as fake as my story. I wished I could stop. I wished I wasn't falling like a stone.

Something caught me. A lean warm grip I now knew well closed tight on me, lowering me to the ground. If my hands had been free, I'd have shoved him away. If I'd been able to speak, he'd have got an earful. As things were I couldn't even see the bastard—my eyes were swelling shut, and he was behind me, the muscles in his chest and belly jerking with silent sobs. I felt a warm splash on my cheek. I knew my head was gently lifted, something woollen tucked underneath it. And that was all for me.

\* \* \*

I recognised the music blasting through the dusty air. At least I thought I did: a poignant violin phrase from that Verve track I'd liked so much a few years back. *Bittersweet Symphony*, that was it. Up and down, sweet, a rush of strings that sounded like a promise of better days to come. I tried to let it bear me back into sleep, but each time it came it broke up into percussion, a skull-shaking avalanche of bass. Some kind of mix, then. I didn't mind it. My sister's kids had used to keep me current, turning up for weekend car drives, iPods pre-loaded with whatever they thought Uncle Vince's ageing brain needed to rejuvenate it next. I liked the thunder drums. Jack had liked fucking to dubstep. I'd liked being athletic enough to cope.

Someone was dancing. A fiery shadow swept across my field of vision, once and then again. My eyes were heavy and sore, and I wouldn't have been able to keep track of him, except somehow he was leaving his mark behind him, a trail. I squinted, trying to make sense of my view. The flame-shadow passed again, in perfect sync with the beat. He swung one arm up in an arc, and a broad black curve leapt out across one wall—random until I worked out how it linked to the other wild shapes already in place there, dynamically waiting, and then a vast human form took life and sprang out of the 2D plane at me.

My Rowan was dancing. He'd found a can of black spray paint, and the bittersweet thunder of the drums was sweeping him round the car park's barren space, conjuring men, beasts and alien flowers as he went. He was almost in flight. His eyes were vacant. He was unleashed, transcendent—a beautiful animal himself, fulfilling his life's natural function.

Not natural, no. Not unaided. His flight brought him close to me. I called out to him through parched lips, but he was oblivious. He reached

high above his head for his next stroke and I saw the fresh bruises down his inner arm.

I couldn't look any more. He wasn't unleashed—he was the most trapped thing on earth, just like Phil, just like anyone who got into the barbed-wire thickets of uncontrolled human desire. Booze, pills, drugs, even the coins the blank-eyed kids spent their days shoving into the machines on the quayside arcades... We were pleasure-seeking apes whose brains took a twist from their satisfactions and never straightened out again. It could happen to anyone. For years I'd let my knowledge of that, my compassion, sour out into hate. Even now I couldn't watch Rowan's dance. I pressed my brow back into the wool of his jumper and closed my eyes.

## Chapter Eleven

Val Foster didn't seem too concerned by my lies. She'd let me rest longer than I'd thought before calling me out on them—I could see dawn light in the strip between the two floors. Maybe she'd wanted to give me my sleep. Apparently she'd had hers. She was washed and dressed in a fresh set of carefully anonymous clothes, as if she'd spent the night comfortably in a hotel. Who was putting up drugs barons these days? I'd thought the new Malmaison too posh, but maybe it was catch as catch can in these difficult times.

She came to crouch beside me. I tried to lift my head to confront her, but I'd stiffened from my beating and nothing seemed to work any more. “What a mess,” she said conversationally. “You must be exhausted by now. Thirsty. Busting for a piss, apart from anything else.”

Three out of three. I still didn't see it was any of her business. I lay watching her, waiting for whatever would come next. She was far more dangerous than the tantrum style of villain who'd have roared back in here and broken my legs the second she found out she'd been duped. I cracked a painful smile. “Good morning, Val.”

“Cheeky.” Without rancour she tugged away Rowan's sweater. My brow hit the concrete. “Who said you could have a pillow? I'll give you your comforts, as and when I choose.”

“I won't hold my breath, then.”

“Oh, you might be surprised. You were convincing, Vince. By the way, it's Miss Foster to you.”

“DS Carr.”

“What?”

“It's DS Carr to you, Miss Foster.”

She shook her head. “Why do all the decent ones pick the side of the angels? You could've made a fortune with me. I'd have sent you to a surgeon in America who'd have popped out your bullets and sent you home feeling like Superman. I look after my staff.”

“I've been looked after.”

“Yeah, it looks that way. As it is, I'm stuck with skinhead thugs and little pricks like Rowan. Did you think you could change him? Fuck him into

salvation?”

I made a silent appointment for some future place and time when I could strangle her, run her over in the biggest police truck I could find and toss the remains off Tynemouth cliffs. “Where is he?”

“Oh—proper sorry for himself this morning. Paying the price for turning this hole into the Tate Modern.” She glanced around. If painted looks could kill, she ought to have dropped dead from the passionate dark eyes staring down from the far wall. “He's good, isn't he? Shame he's so fucked up. That one's a self-portrait, Vince. I think he tried to leave a part of himself watching over you. Come on. I'm tired of this game.”

I didn't understand her way of ending it. She had her heavies drag me to my feet and slice away the tape from my ankles and wrists. The freedom, the return of balance and circulation, almost overwhelmed me, and I bit my lip not to show my relief, swaying in one big thug's grasp. He let me stagger to one dark corner which, from the evidence, had been used as a toilet before. Clearly I hadn't done anything to win anybody's trust: he held a gun on me the whole time it took for me to unzip and have a piss. I might once have found that off-putting, but I was far past such delicacies now. When I was done, he marched me back to Val, who was sitting in the open rear hatch of the Mondeo, pouring what looked and smelled like tea from a thermos.

She held out a plastic cup to me. “Here. You must be parched.”

“You've got to be kidding.”

She rolled her eyes. “Jesus. Like I'd waste my time poisoning you with tea!” Nevertheless she took a swig herself, held the cup out again. “Go on.”

“Like you couldn't drink raw sewage and thrive on it, you toxic cow.”

“Ah, now, Vince! That's not nice. Think of all the trouble you've given me. I lost two of my best lads in your cop shop's midnight raid, not to mention six kilos of perfectly beautiful H. You know, up until that point, I'd nearly believed you.”

I took the tea. There was about to be all hell to pay, I could see that. I didn't know why I was being wined and dined like this beforehand, but I reckoned I'd better make the most of it. I drank deeply, then chucked the cup away into the piss and garbage. “All right,” I said, leaning back against the heavy with the gun. I had to make the most of him too—my knees were weak, the room starting to lurch. “What now?”

“Now I kill two birds with one stone. I'm a busy woman, Vince. I need that information—straight this time. Since smacking you about doesn't work, I'm going to make a little investment.”

I swallowed hard. I'd known this was coming. Hopelessly I looked for escape routes, distractions, any damn thing to put distance between myself and Val Foster's plans for me. I didn't know for sure I was any better than Phil, any stronger. Some cops on the drug squad tried the goods, made sure they knew the enemy. Not me. I'd been too scared, and not of hating the damn stuff. “Don't be daft,” I said uneasily. “I can't talk if I'm off my face.”

“There's more than one bottle to drink out of. You know that better than anyone. Some make you tall, some make you small... One makes you sing like a fucking canary.”

“That reminds me. Who's your other bird?”

Instantly I wished I hadn't asked. I'd been trying to divert her, give myself another few seconds of thought. My legs had been free for five minutes now—even if they felt like boiled spaghetti, I ought to be good for a short run. She was grinning nastily, for the first time resembling the monster she was. “My other bird? Your lad Rowan, of course.” She snapped her fingers in the direction of the car. “Come on, you. Rise and shine.”

The figure slumped in the front seat barely disturbed its contours. I'd never seen anything so lifeless as the man who climbed out at her command: had to look twice to persuade myself it was last night's flame-shadow dancer. He was sheet-white, shivering. Not with cold, either. I knew that look. I rounded on Foster, as hard as I could before her bouncer grabbed me. “Jesus Christ. What have you done to him? Nothing works that fast!”

“Doesn't it? Don't you think there's a reason I've swept like a hot wind up this bloody country? There's just no competition after me, copper. Once you've had Val's crack, you never go back.”

I'd drag her crushed body up out of the sea, dry her out long enough to douse her in petrol and then set fire to her. “That good, is it?”

“Oh, it's good enough. The difference is, it hooks you like a fucking fish. One dose, one night, and you're mine. Like little Rowan here.” She stretched out a hand, and Rowan stumbled to her side and passively took it. “He ran so far away. With his fresh new start and his policeman boyfriend...”

When someone goes that far, they have to prove themselves before they can come home.”

“Oh, shit. Foster, don't do this. He isn't worth it.”

“It's a shame you think so. You were worth a lot to him.” She gave Rowan's hand a sympathetic squeeze. “Just not enough—eh, Ro?”

Rowan led me back to the chair. I didn't feel inclined to fight him, and even if I had, the Walther was trained on me again. He crouched beside me, pulling out the roll of gaffer tape and a sharp blade. His head was bowed. If Foster hadn't been malignly watching, I'd have caressed his tangled hair. I put out my ankles for him, then my wrists. His hands trembled violently over their task, but he bound me up efficiently again.

Foster nodded when he was done. “That's good. Now go and get the kit from the car. Take a few deep breaths, son—you'll never hit a vein with shakes like that.”

I tried to catch his eye when he returned from the car. I didn't know what I'd say to him if I succeeded. I couldn't dissuade him from this, and he'd be shot for his rebellion if I did. Maybe I wanted to tell him not to bear me on his conscience. “Rowan,” I whispered.

He didn't look at me. He pushed up the sleeve of my jacket and produced a rubber tie. He snapped it round my arm, expertly filled a syringe from a vial. Then he leaned in close.

His voice barely carried across the distant purr of early traffic. Only I would hear. “Wait till I give you the signal. The tape will tear free when you pull. And when I shoot this stuff into you—for God's sake, *act*.”

I knew how to do that. I'd bust into enough council-house living rooms, thickly curtained against daylight, their occupants sprawled across the sofas and floors. If the squad had arrived at the right moment, there'd still be needles in slackening hands, eyes opening wide on unimaginable inner vistas. For the old stagers, the lifers, relief would be most prominent in their emptying masks, release from withdrawal, the unrelenting nag of want. The newcomers still looked surprised.

I was a newcomer. Surprise would suit me fine, and I'd hardly have to act at all. Rowan—who'd fallen among thieves and dragged me down after him, delivered me into their hands—was trying some stunt to save me. At gunpoint, too: the gorilla had stepped back as if to watch the show, but I still had a clear view up the Walther's black snout. Surprise would come



easy. Terror, too. It might not be crack in that syringe but I didn't fancy having anything from out of Val Foster's dirty car shot into my veins. I shrank back as far as my bonds would let me. "Please, Rowan! Don't!"

I'd pitched it for Val and the guards. His reply was louder too. "It's okay. I'm good at this—I won't hurt you. Then nothing'll hurt any more, Vince, I promise. Nothing will hurt, and you'll be able to talk to Val, tell her everything she needs to know. Everything's better if you trust Val. Just relax, now. Just..."

The needle sank into my arm. I was properly scared for the occasion: a great blue snake of a vein had risen beneath the tie-off band, driven by my soaring blood pressure. I jerked my head back, moaning. Whatever hit I'd been expecting didn't come. There was just a cold sting, then a vague spreading coolness. Foster had come to glower down at me. I averted my eyes against her interrogative stare. How long was this stuff supposed to take to work? Long enough, I prayed, for me to think up a fresh batch of misinformation to spill...

An engine revved loudly. The sound came from street level, somewhere up over our heads. Foster took no notice of it, too busy waiting for my floodgates to open. Then a clattering began—faint at first, quickly escalating to a roar like the end of creation. Foster snapped to attention. She grabbed me by the collar. "That had better not be something to do with you, Carr."

Of course I was too spaced out to tell her. I just lolled, and she shook me once like a rat then let me go. She jabbed a finger at three of her guards. "You! With me. You, stay here and watch them."

She'd left behind the heavy with the Walther. There was no help for that. I waited till the running footsteps had faded, then I glanced up at Rowan. "I guess that was the signal?"

"Yeah. Best I could do."

It was good enough for me. One gorilla I could handle, even packing heat. I yanked at the tape round my ankles and wrists and it instantly tore. That gave me three seconds max while the guard didn't know what the fuck was going on, and I made best use of them—lunged out of the chair and hurled myself at him. I caught him amidships, gravity and momentum on my side. He went down hard, and I used him as a crash mat, getting a grip on his meaty wrist and knocking the gun out of his hand. Rowan pounced

on it as it skittered away. "Sorry," he said, bringing it back at arm's length. "Don't know how to use it."

"I bloody do." I straddled my victim. This felt great. At some point I'd fold up like matchwood but just now I was one mass of spiking adrenaline. I took the Walther in both hands, levelled it at the guard's brow. "Right! Best way out of here, you—*not* the one they took!"

He coughed, winded by my impact. "Up... Up through the ramps. There's stairs onto the street."

"Ta. Well, I guess you know how this feels." I flipped the gun, knocked him neatly round the skull with its butt. I felt no compunction. He'd have a smaller headache than mine when he woke up. I staggered upright and seized Rowan's arm. "Come on! We've got to run."

"No. You go."

"What?" He was trying to pull back from me, his eyes a hollow blank. "Now, Rowan!"

"I can't go with you."

"They'll kill you on sight when they get back."

"I know."

No more time for argument. I'd have marched him at gunpoint if that would have worked, but I'd started to know him better. "If you don't run, I'll drag you. Or carry you, and that's gonna hurt me. Don't make me do it."

"Oh, fuck, Vince."

But I'd won. When I started running, his wrist still clamped tight in my hand, he didn't fight. Our feet were quiet on the concrete ramps, and just as well—before we'd even reached the stairs, I heard Val and her lads tearing back into the basement, and the volley of swearing that followed. Rowan was trying to look back. Well, the damn place had been Sodom and Gomorrah to him—the scene where he'd ended his long hard fight to get clean. I pushed him in front of me, bundled him roughly up the steps. The flight was steep, but still I felt superhuman, the hole Jack had left in me suddenly filled, overflowing with lights.

The river air hit me, filling my lungs. I gasped it hungrily—Newcastle dawn, cold, unforgiving, tide-borne salt and coral sky. Seizing Rowan by the shoulders, I forced him to look at me. "You went back to Foster on purpose."

“Yes. I knew you were going out on your own, you pigheaded bastard. I couldn't bloody stop you. All I could do was try to get here first.”

“You came here for me.”

A door banged behind us in the stairwell. I knew where we were now. The seagulls mewed and wheeled. A chaos of alleys led down to the quayside and above us, stupendous in the half-light, the arc of the Tyne Bridge leapt skyward, one great green metal span. The Victorian lanterns restored for the millennium were still burning, pale against the oncoming day. A rat like Val Foster would plunge down the alleys. Could I induce her to make one mistake? “Come on.”

“Not that way. There's nowhere to hide.”

“I know.”

We ran for the bridge. Rowan had stopped arguing—I didn't have to hold him to keep him at my side, but he was like a lamb to slaughter, movements ragged, breath catching exhaustedly in his throat. We hauled up the last steep bank and out onto the footway, nothing but the water beneath us, the sky above. As a refuge, it was useless. But it did have one asset, a relic the tide of regeneration hadn't yet swept away—a public payphone in a steel-and-glass kiosk. I was willing to bet Foster's gang hadn't left Rowan with his mobile, and mine was long gone. “Don't suppose you've got any change.”

“What?” He stopped dead beside me, fumbled in his pockets. “No. Not a thing.”

So I exercised my rights as an ordinary citizen, dragged open the heavy kiosk door and punched in 999 for my free call. Which emergency service did I require? Police, please, and sharpish. I leaned my brow on the glass while the line rang. Christ, did we always take so long? I'd have to make them hustle things up when I got home. Finally I got an operator, a local one who understood when I said *Mansion Street, Bill Hodges*, then rattled off my location, my rank and my ID.

Bill picked up. Once more I had occasion to thank God for him. He said his name, and then there was just an attentive silence. “Bill. I'm on the Tyne Bridge. I've got Rowan Clyde with me, and Val Foster and her thugs are after us. I need backup.”

“You'll have it. You're not armed, are you?”

“The hell I'm not.”

“Good lad. Try not to shoot any citizens, but hold out. Okay?”

I couldn't answer—I was twisting around in the kiosk, wiping steam off its dirty glass. His urgent repeats of my name faded out in static, and I let the receiver drop. I'd let go of Rowan, hadn't I? For a fatal half-minute, forgotten him.

I fell out of the box. The pavement was empty, the long stretch out across the water deserted. My instinct was to double back into the quayside alleys. Val Foster's gravity, her bloody tractor beams, were still clamped tight to him, and he didn't think he was worth anything better. He would fall.

But when I swung round, I saw him in a flash between one truck and the next. He'd darted to the far side of the road and got no further. He had his back to me, his hands clamped to the iron parapet.

It was only waist high. It seemed to invite a climb, a pre-death stroll along its path. It was broad, and there was that huge sweeping arc to watch above your head. I'd seen a girl do that once—just dance her way out, off her face and giggling, staring at the gleaming reflections of the water in the great metal crest until she dropped. It was a favourite spot. The Samaritans knew this, and had posted reminders of their presence and services at strategic points all along the rail.

I didn't shout. I was all copper now—had to be. I dodged between the next two lorries, threaded the traffic on the other side, and came to an unbreathing halt a few yards back from him. “Rowan.”

He didn't turn or look at me. I didn't think he was looking at anything, though his gaze was blindly fixed on one of the posters. I risked a step, holding out one hand. “We can call those guys if you like. But... I'd be quicker.”

“Leave me be.”

“I will. But just do something for me, mate. Just take your hands off the rail.”

“Why?”

“I'd like you to. That's all.”

He did. He swung on me so fiercely I thought he would drop to his knees, and I got ready to leap forward, make my securing grab. “Get out of here!” he yelled. “Go on, before that bitch and her knuckleheads catch up.

I'm nothing but a junkie, Vince. I'll never be anything else, so just... just piss off and let me go, all right?"

"Go where? Into the river?"

"Yeah, if I've got the balls for it. Because..."

"Because what?" I was yelling too now. "Come on! Just fucking tell me!"

"Because if I had any choice, I'd crawl back to Val Foster and I'd *beg* her for her dope! I'd do anything to get it. I'd do anything for one more night like last night. To paint like that."

"You can do it sober."

"I can't!"

"Christ—have the balls to try! The painting's just you, not the drugs. The dancing, too."

His brow creased. "I was dancing?"

"Yes. Like a beautiful fire."

"Oh, Vince, get away from me! *Run!*"

He was finished. He was shaking so hard from withdrawal that he couldn't keep his feet. He turned grey beneath a sheen of sweat, doubled up and vomited onto the kerb. I got to him before he fell: folded to my knees with him, pulled his racked body tight into my arms. "You poor bastard," I whispered, rocking him. "For God's sake let me help you. Let me help."

## Chapter Twelve

“**W**hat did you give me, then? Back in Val's fortress?”

I was just trying to keep him awake. I wasn't sure he could hear me, let alone reply. His shivers had intensified almost to convulsion, then he'd gone frighteningly still. His head was on my shoulder, his eyes wide and unblinking, full of the golden light now spilling from the east along the Tyne. A few early morning joggers and cyclists had appeared, and a couple had even stopped. I was always surprised how many would, in this edgy, stone-hearted town. They were standing around, awkward as people usually were on these occasions, unsure whether to help or back off. I'd told them I was a cop, though I didn't think they believed me. I'd told them it was okay. It would be. I could hear sirens. I could see blue lights flashing in the traffic jam beyond the motorway underpass.

“Vitamins.”

I sat back a bit so I could see him. His gaze was still empty and lost but he was smiling, and the word had come clearly enough. “Vitamins? How the hell did you manage that?”

“I had... In my jacket. I'd forgotten. I'd been to the doc's and he said I was run down, and since...” Bitterness shadowed his face. “Since I was an experienced IV user, I might as well have them in a shot. He gave me them to self-administer. I forgot one. Val took everything else off me, but she missed that.”

“How did you swap the stuff?”

“I was in the car. I was meant to be passed out. Bit by bit I pulled the box through from the back and swapped one.”

“Bloody hell. You do know she'd have shot you if she'd checked?” God, he was cold—I tore my jacket off and wrapped it round him, rubbing his shoulders and back. “Hang on, okay? Talk to me. What about all that racket?”

“Oh, that...” He broke off, coughing. “That was easy. Council dump truck always reverses and turns in that entry, same time every day. Last night I piled some bins up where the driver wouldn't see them. So he'd knock them down.”

“That was smart. But you were off your face last night.”

“Not so far off it I couldn't think. I think better then. I do everything better.” He groaned and curled up tighter, hiding his face. “Oh, Vince. You should've let me jump.”

“Ssh.” At last the snarl-up down the road was clearing. As I watched, a police car manoeuvred to the front of the queue and came tearing up out of the underpass, lights blazing. “Don't you talk like that. Here's the cavalry.”

“Cavalry? More like a fucking donkey-race, copper.”

I jerked my head up. One of the kindly bystanders was a slender woman with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. I'd have sworn she hadn't been there before. But this was Val Foster's gift, wasn't it—to emerge from nowhere and disappear back, leaving little trace of herself in between. Hundreds of immigration clerks must have passed her through, barely registering her presence. Even with a gun in her hand she wasn't attracting attention. She only had mine because it was aimed square at Rowan's head.

I wrapped my hand round his skull. It was a hopeless gesture, flesh and bone a bullet would punch through like cobweb. “Jesus, Foster. Back off!”

There was a moment. If anyone else but Bill Hodges had been at the wheel of the car, the whole scene would have gone to hell. Foster needed a hostage. With Rowan at gunpoint, me as a human shield, she stood a chance. The Mondeo jolted out of the alley that led to the car park, mounting the pavement to get past the slowing traffic. I knew how it would work. She only had to get me to my feet, drag me and Rowan far enough to meet her ride. I knew she'd kill me and take him.

But there was good reason why Bill reigned supreme over Mansion Street. He was a very quiet man. If you met him in the street you'd think him harmless, and so he was to civilians and friends. In the hunt, sure of his facts and his target, he was a wolf. He slewed the car to a broadside halt across two lanes of traffic, blocking the Mondeo. Before Val Foster could so much as blink he was out on the tarmac, weapon so easy in his grasp it looked like part of him. He didn't offer her a chance she could turn down—not even a cursory *freeze*. He took a perfect aim at her right shoulder and fired.

Chaos erupted on the bridge. Foster's weapon flew like a sparrowhawk out across the parapet, briefly caught the light and disappeared. Three other police vehicles screeched to a halt, officers spilling out and starting to run. A woman—not Val, who'd been knocked back against the rail and was

clutching her shoulder, her face an outraged blank—burst into terrified screams. The coppers joined battle with the Mondeo Four, and Bill himself came running over to where I crouched with Rowan, holstering his gun, sharply ordering a sergeant to get Foster cuffed and detained. He slithered to a stop, dropped to one knee beside me. “Vince! Are you okay?”

I couldn't get breath to tell him. I was still hearing the gunshot—seeing again in my mind the jerk of Foster's pistol as she recoiled. Then Rowan shivered in my arms. “Fine. I'm fine. But he needs an ambulance.”

“I've got one on its way for you.” Bill pushed Rowan's damp hair back from his brow. He was gentle. I loved him for it. “This our reluctant witness, then?”

“Yeah. But he can't help us, not like that. He's done enough.”

“All right. Tell me once we're out of here. What's the matter with him?”

“He's sick. That bitch Foster shot him up with some new crack she's been selling all over the country. It's lethal—hooks you tight after one dose. He needs help.”

“We'll get him straight to detox at the General. Vince, where the hell have you—”

“I *can* help you.”

Bill and I both looked at Rowan. He had struggled upright in my arms. He was clutching my shoulders, staring after Val Foster, who was being dragged off between two burly officers. “I *can* be a witness,” he said hoarsely. “I was coming home – back to Half Moon Chambers. I saw the door swing open and the kid, the Chinese girl, try to run out. I saw Maric grab her and drag her back inside. I heard the gun go off.”

I propped him up. “Don't worry about it now.” It all mattered so much less to me now than the painful rattle in his chest. “Just breathe.”

“I wanted to tell the cops when they arrived – I went down, and they saw me. I was too damn scared. I ran. But...” His eyes were fixing on the distance, his lips going blue. “I've stopped running now. I'll be your witness for Maric. And her—Foster... I'll do anything to bring her down.”



## Chapter Thirteen

If Bill wondered at my insistence on travelling with Rowan in the ambulance, he didn't say anything. He didn't object when I followed the stretcher as far as I was allowed into the General's emergency rooms, and when I came limping back he was waiting. "We got Val Foster," he said as soon as I was within earshot. He was practically rubbing his hands together with glee. "We only bloody got Val Foster."

"You got her. How is she?"

"Fine. Getting the best of care—next door to Clyde, more's the pity. I asked, but they refused to leave her out in the gutter."

"Rowan's under guard?"

"Round the clock. I told you we'd look after him. Er, Vince..."

I waited. Here it came. He was the most lenient of senior officers, but even he had his limits. The hospital reception was crowded, and I didn't resist when he drew me into an alcove, steadied me while I sank into a plastic chair. He took up a position opposite. "Look, I have to ask. Are you and he—Rowan, I mean... Because I know you and Jack Monroe were..."

I had to help him out. "Yes," I said simply, too worn out to consider a sidestep or a lie. "That's a problem, isn't it?"

"Bloody hell. You and Jack weren't a problem, no. But this one—how on earth did you end up..." He sat back in his chair, blowing his cheeks out. "Never mind. It's better if I don't know. Until we're through this case, until he's no longer a witness—yes. It's a problem. Do you understand?"

I did. I wanted to tell Bill so, in case he thought my silence meant rebellion. But Rowan was alive and breathing, for now at least safe, and I hadn't even begun to work out what that meant to me. The doc had said they'd give him methadone, that he'd have a hard time but wouldn't die of the crash. Not this time. I knew what those words meant, delivered in that tone. Rowan would get good care. They'd be impartial with him, but arm's-length. He wouldn't get chatter and smiles like the footballer they'd just brought in off the pitch with a broken leg. I had to find my voice. "I understand. Will you tell the staff here he isn't... Yes, he was an addict. But he stopped two years ago. He's like this today because of me."

"Because of you?"

“He tried to warn me about Val Foster. He knew I wouldn't leave it alone, so he went back to them. To be there when they got me.”

“What—infiltrated them and took their drugs, just to help you out? Vince, this lad's lied to you from the start. I finally had time to get a background check on him. His name's not even—”

“I know!” I got to my feet. There wasn't much room to pace, so I thudded my palms off the glass of the vending machine, which groaned and spat out a can of Tizer. I'd thought I'd never trust another human being again, let alone suddenly develop a white-hot faith that consumed common sense and made me want to punch out unbelievers. “I know his name's not Rowan. But the rest is true. He gave up everything to save me.”

“All right.” Bill appeared at my side. He fished the tin out of the machine and opened it. “Want some?”

“What? No!”

“Then sit down and take deep breaths. If you believe him, I do. A jury even might, if we can get the poor bastard cleaned up. I've requested a placement for him at St Mary's.”

“The mental hospital? He's not...”

“Their rehab wing. It's a lot less Victorian on the inside than out, and they get results. He'd be secure there, and the department will fund the programme. Nobody's marching him off in leg irons. It's just an option.” He pulled a chair forward and gently dumped me into it. “And actually, his name *is* Rowan.”

“But he told me...”

“He ran away up here as David Clyde. But he started using Rowan again at his gallery job. Stupid of him really—it's very distinctive.”

*No, not stupid. He was lost. It was a spar from the wreckage. My Rowan.* I leaned my elbows on my knees. My vision was hazing and sparkling. Through the grubby tiles at my feet I could see a painted chamber, a basement car park, a dark-eyed god in spray paint watching over me. I clasped my hands behind my head.

Bill's warm grip closed on my shoulder. “He'll be all right, son. And as regards how the staff treat him, you can tell them that yourself.”

“What? No, Bill—it'll have more poke coming from you.”

“Maybe, but you'll be here to supervise.”

I looked up. The emergency teams must have finished dealing with Rowan, Val and the footballer, enough of them at least to spare the small contingent approaching me now, one of them pushing a wheelchair. “Oh, shit. I don't need... I just need to go home for a wash and a few plasters.”

Bill chuckled. “You look like you've gone four rounds with both Klitschkos. And God knows what all this has done to your back. No, you're in here overnight. At least.”

There was no point in arguing. The sands of my willpower and strength had been running out since Bill had roared up onto the bridge with his H&K. There'd been leakage before, but after that, relieved from my post, I'd let them go. I didn't resist a pair of orderlies hoisting me up and into the chair.

They were wheeling me away when Bill called them back. “Hoi. You might like to know—I had Chief Inspector Walsh on the phone twenty minutes ago. When he heard who traced Foster for us, he was all for giving you a commendation.”

I struggled for a smile. That was nice, I supposed, though I was a very long way past caring.

“I advised him, however, that since you'd been acting against my orders, rewards were inappropriate. And I can tell you right now, Harry Callahan—you ever try anything like that again, you're fired.”

\* \* \*

I entered the ICU quietly. I'd been cleaned up and bandaged, my split lip stitched, and I'd slept for ten hours straight, after swearing to the nurses and anyone who'd listen that I'd never so much as close my eyes on the noisy ward. Bill had brought me in fresh clothes. I felt strange, spacey and unshelled, coming to stand by Rowan's bed.

He had a glass-walled cubicle to himself. I was acquainted with those. They allowed for full observation whilst preventing unstoppable howls from scaring the crap out of visitors. He was curled up in the horizontal bands of sunlight making their way through the blinds, but he was awake, his eyes lucid. “Vince,” he said as soon as he saw me. “I've got to talk to you.”

I helped him sit up. He was still attached to monitor wires and three drips. I negotiated these out of his way, levered up the headboard and eased a second pillow behind his back. “You look like a mad scientist should be cackling over you in a Transylvanian castle.”

“Yeah. You're very pretty yourself.”

“What's all these, then? Rehydration? They giving you something to take the edge off?”

“Yes. I'm much better. Er... Look, it's okay. You can stop.”

I was fussing, I supposed. I was far from prone to it, but he looked so frail. I left off tugging up a blanket to cover his naked chest, and at last I met his eyes. I swallowed. “Oh, Rowan.”

He reached up for me. We were on full display up and down the ICU but I didn't care: I leaned down into his embrace, pulling him up to meet me. I buried my face in the soft hair behind his ear. His arms tightened round my shoulders and his breath came deep and hungry, as if he wanted to remember how I smelled. “Please let me go,” he whispered. “Sit down and listen to me. Please.”

I kept him for a little while, only a short ten seconds. There were things I wanted to remember too, and already I knew this was my last chance. Then I released him, making sure I didn't snag any of the wires or lines. “Okay. Listening.”

“Your nice boss has booked me a luxury cruise to St Mary's.”

“Right. I know. He's not nice, actually—he wants you to suffer and burn for his own selfish purposes. But go on.”

“I want to do the programme. If anyone can sort me out, they can. But that's the problem, Vince. You won't like hearing this. Can you let me finish?”

I was sure I could. I leaned my elbows on the bed and pressed my fingers to my mouth just in case.

“I think I'm gonna lose this fight. And... I don't want you around when I do. I'm not saying you would hate me, or that you couldn't cope, but—I don't want you having to try. You've spent all your life dealing with crackheads like me. You lost your brother to dope, and... Christ, I know you hate junkies. I don't blame you for a second.”

*You're not a junkie.* I pressed my fingers tighter. I'd said I would listen, and I wouldn't help either of us by interrupting with a lie. He smiled faintly,

as if he'd read my thought. "Good lad. I want to be a witness, and I've got to get dried out to do that. What happens afterwards—if I can hang on—fuck knows. But I've been here before, and I know the one thing I can't afford to do is *feel* anything. Nothing. Not hope, not fear." He drew his knees up, wrapped his arms round them as best he could. "Definitely not that I've fallen in love with a copper. You have to go while I can bear to let you, and I can't see you again—not like that. I don't know what we had, but it's over. This is shit I have to shovel on my own."

I got up. For the best part of a minute, I didn't know what the hell I was going to do. Rowan didn't move or look at me, and I stood by the bed, fists clenched. Anger was easiest, so I fell back on that. I didn't hate junkies. And even if I did, that had nothing to do with Phil. And Phil in his turn was none of Rowan's damn business.

The kneejerk rage dissolved. That left me facing the other thing he'd said. I felt as if I'd stepped off a cliff. Would there be that cartoon moment of suspension in the air before the drop? *Fallen in love with a copper. It's over.*

I couldn't speak. Rowan had hidden his face against his knees. I'd had my word or three with the staff about his status as a witness and the care I expected him to receive, and they'd cleaned him up nicely, washing and combing his hair. He had a kind of feathery parting in it: they'd put that on the wrong side. I reached out and stroked the damp strands back into place. He didn't stir or look up at me. His shoulder blades were standing starkly. He was worn to a shadow—I could count the vertebrae running down the hollow of his spine, and the poor sod was only at the start of his fight. I leaned in and kissed the crown of his head. Then I walked out, tasting hospital soap, the memory of his hair's cool silk still vivid on my lips.

## Chapter Fourteen

I took Rowan at his word. I didn't visit him again at the hospital, and once he'd been transferred to rehab, I didn't try to storm the gloomy walls of St Mary's. I did go there one frosty afternoon shortly after his arrival, but only long enough to write him a note saying I'd called. I left it at reception with one of his careworkers. Bill had been right—behind its grim red brickwork, the place was cheerful enough, the staff kindly and competent. They stopped me before I could even get to the desk, politely demanding my business. That was good.

I told the nurse not to give Rowan the note unless he asked about me. I sat for a while on a bench in the grounds, looking up at the windows, which stared blankly back at me from behind their wrought-iron bars. On the far side of the road, an unmarked police car pulled up to relieve the officer already on surveillance duty just outside the gates. When the fragile sunlight sank behind the branches of the beech trees in the park, and the rooks began gathering and cawing for their roost, I went home.

As soon as Bill agreed my face would no longer frighten the kiddies, I went back to work. Mansion Street had been transformed by the capture of Foster and her gang. Bill had been promoted, and was thoroughly happy, harassed and embarrassed at the change. He kept me busy liaising with the lawyers on both sides of the Maric trial and Foster's, which would come immediately after it. There was no shortage of evidence now. All of her dens had been raided, and I myself would take great pleasure in describing for a jury the joys of a stay in Val's basement. She was getting ready to cop a massive plea. No honour among her kind of thieves, and Bill stood fair to have cracked trafficking rings as far south as Manchester.

So I too was a witness, and Bill offered me protection of my own—nothing heavy, just lifts to and from work and an alert system fitted in my flat. A fortnight ago I'd have refused. A hit would have solved all my problems in one, afforded me an honourable exit. Now I found I didn't want to go. I couldn't have said why. I was lonelier than ever, in just as much pain.

I was also in the grip of a fierce new happiness unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. I accepted Bill's escort. I tried, just as a novelty, going

to bed before midnight, eating a few regular meals. One night I went to visit my sister Jane, and I told her I'd quit taking the kids out because I was no longer capable of keeping them safe when they were with me. The admission would have shamed me utterly before. Better that Lily and her brothers felt neglected. I'd never confessed to Jane the extent of my injuries. She looked at my scars—sat down and wept for a minute, then informed me I was a moron, and we'd all go out together from now on. We cracked a bottle of wine and sat for hours at her kitchen table. We talked about Phil for the first time in years, and I told her about Rowan.

Not everything. Not the part where he'd said that he loved me. With his next breath he'd broken us up, and the changes in my world view were based on the flimsiest of foundations, a dream that had touched me and dissolved in daylight. Nevertheless I'd constantly replayed those two minutes by his hospital bed. I'd tried to find some other meaning for *I've fallen in love with a copper*, then I briefly tried to kid myself he'd meant somebody else. But I couldn't deny, destroy or dismantle what I'd heard. The memory of it made my heart thump and race in my chest even when I was sitting doing nothing, and when someone knocked at my front door just after midnight, a fortnight to the day since I'd last seen Rowan, I lurched upright and stood trembling.

I'd been doing nothing for hours. Today he'd have come to the end of his first stage of rehab. He'd have been discharged, left to see how he coped in the world on his own. Bill had assigned him surveillance, liaised with his gallery boss to make sure he kept his job, and if he was in one piece seven days down the line, he'd enter the witness box to speak against Foster and Maric. Perhaps he'd been to work today. I'd left him alone while he fought this final battle for his soul. Maybe, despite all his fears, he might believe he'd won.

More likely it was the surveillance cop Bill had given me. The night was chilly, and now I'd stopped holding everyone at stony arm's-length distance, my colleagues had started talking to me again. Probably the lad on duty tonight had got cold and decided to pop up for a cup of tea. That was fine. I was remembering the pleasures of camaraderie. If it wasn't Rowan standing in the hallway, that diffident smile of his lighting his face, I could cope. I'd just ask Constable Jones, Conroy or Mason in for his cuppa and some idle chat—the footie results and the weather, and digestive biscuits

dunked in a mug of PG Tips. I could cope with an ordinary world. I checked the spyhole in the door as Bill had ordered me to do, but my visitor was standing too close. I swallowed. I knew I should open up discreetly on the chain, but I just couldn't wait any more.

I flung the door wide, and I found myself staring straight at Jack Monroe.

Neither of us spoke. He had an air of fresh arrival about him, a holdall in his hand with the baggage ties still on it. If Apollo had decided to drop in from ancient Greece, he couldn't have looked more exotic in my hallway. I couldn't have expected him less. There was nowhere in this hemisphere where he could have acquired that tan, that look of warm distances in his blue eyes. He'd always been a beauty. Six months in a sunny climate—and apparently he'd spent most of them in a gym—had perfected him. His blond hair had been expertly cut. I flashed back to wet black strands on a pale brow, and I tasted hospital soap.

I retreated a couple of steps from the door. I had to find words. “What are you doing here? Did they cancel the Baywatch remake?”

A paralysis of tension left him. I realised he too had been struggling for speech. He broke into a grin whose brightness had also been enhanced since our last meeting. “Hi, Vinnie. My mam's not well. I had to come home.”

“God, I always meant to break this to you gently. I'm not your mum.”

He snorted. “Oh, thank fuck. You haven't changed a bit. I came here straight from the airport because... Well, as far as my head's concerned it's four in the afternoon, and I wanted to see you before I did anything else. I wanted to talk to you.” I couldn't think of a response, and a burning silence extended itself. His smile faded. “You know,” he said faintly, looking at the ground, “the stairs are just behind me. If you want to push me down.”

My throat ached. Was this it? After all the pain and self-doubt I'd crawled through, was this his confession? I didn't know how I'd react. As for the stairs, I might not have the strength. But there was a tricky catch on the living room window—that would do the job, and a two-hundred-foot drop might almost be enough. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Well, I... shipped out on you, didn't I? When I got this job in the States. I never even said goodbye.”

I shrugged. We were back on our old ground, then. That suited me. Everything about Jack, every way in which he could matter to me, had



flowed off under my bridge long since in a tide of blood and tears. He was just a gorgeous stranger to me now. “Forget it.” I turned away. “Come on in. You want something to drink?”

“Vince, you're limping.”

Was I? The physi-ogre wouldn't like that. I stopped myself, and continued on into the kitchen with a straight spine.

“Is that from the shooting?”

I was vaguely aware of him closing the door, slinging his holdall onto the sofa. I got down two glasses and a bottle of his favourite scotch. “Nope. Just tired.”

“Because I heard from Bill, when he was sending my papers and stuff out to me, that you'd been left pretty bad off. But I didn't think... You were on the mend, last time I saw you. I thought you'd be okay.”

“I am. I'm working. Bill found me a desk.”

“A desk job? You?”

I poured us out two generous measures. He couldn't hurt me. He was blood beneath my bridge. “Yeah.” I smiled at him over my shoulder. “It beats flipping burgers. Anyway, how about you? How's your senator?”

“Still alive, so I must be doing something right. What's happened in here, Vinnie? Where's all your mess and your rugs? It looks like you've had the bailiffs in.”

I brought the drinks into the living room. Jack was looking round him, a sun god in a concrete cell. I gestured to him to sit down, and I took a chair opposite him—not too close, but I wanted to be able to see him. I wanted him to see me too. “I had to get rid of everything I could trip over,” I began. His eyes met mine, their sapphire darkening. “Because if I fall, I end up screaming like a bitch from the pain, and that... that does fuck-all for my dignity.”

“You never had your second bullet taken out.”

“No. I never dared. I can still walk and do most things for myself. I tell you what, Jack—you never appreciate stuff like going to the bog on your own until some poor bastard's had to carry you there.”

Jack put down his glass. He laced his fingers together. His gaze remained locked to mine. He compressed his lips so hard I thought he would draw blood. “I ran,” he said. “That night on the quayside when you got shot—I panicked. I ran.”

Some weight I hadn't known was there evaporated—off my back, off my heart. I didn't want to chuck him out the window or down the stairs. For a long minute I just sat there in a kind of freefall limbo. I felt as if I could grow wings. But when I spoke, I sounded to myself ordinary, friendly. I sounded like the man I had once been. “That could happen to anyone.”

“Yes. I know. I wasted thousands of dollars in therapy working that out. But when I found out it could happen to me, I knew I wasn't fit to be a copper. Especially... Especially not a partner to a copper like you.”

I thought about all the things I'd planned to say if ever I had him at my mercy. They were flying away from me, fading like the seagulls that swept their lamplit wings beneath my window and vanished into the fog. I had to say something. Jack's voice had grated to silence. He was watching me as if waiting for a thunderclap, a blow.

I sat back. I propped my bare feet on the edge of his chair—not touching, but echoing our old way of occupying this part of my flat. “Forget it.”

“*Forget it...* Vince, did you hear me? How can you possibly forgive—”

“I know about fear, Jack. Sometimes your body just takes you away.”

He released an explosive breath. “That's it. That was exactly it. One second I was there, about to run to your rescue, and the next I was belting up that fucking hill in the dark, not knowing where the hell I was going. And I couldn't come back. I couldn't...”

“Ssh.” I pressed my foot to his knee. Everything was quiet in me now. I wanted to quiet him too, ease the desperation whitening his knuckles. “I mean it. Thank you for telling me now, but... let it go.” I left it a few beats. Then I gave his knee a tiny shove, and I waited till his brow creased in enquiry. “My God. You had *therapy*?”

“Yeah. Full-on West Coast style. His office had a plate-glass window looking out onto the beach, and he mixed his own fruit smoothies at his desk.” He began to laugh, then clapped his hand to his mouth as if he'd told a joke at a funeral. His expression softened in a way I knew well. Before I could stop him, he'd got to his feet, transferred himself lithely from the chair to the sofa at my side. “Oh, Vinnie. I've missed you.”

I shifted away from him. It was just an inch, but he felt it, and the arm that would have gone around my shoulders stretched out along the back of the sofa instead. We were terribly used to one another. An embrace like that

would turn into a squeeze, haul me in unthinkingly for a kiss. I saw him abort the move—not much on the surface, but a painful inward halt that should have been accompanied by a screech of tyres. It left us in awkward proximity. I was already as far along the sofa as I could get. He'd have to work out some kind of subtle retreat for himself, unless... “Are you hungry?” I asked. “What do they have in California for their tea?”

“Oh—ready-meal shepherd's pie from Asda, often as not.”

“That's handy.” As usual my freezer was stocked with those and similar delicacies that saved me from ever needing to cook. “Want me to put some on for you?”

“Er... Yeah. Thanks.”

I didn't know if he did or he didn't, but it got me off the sofa. He watched me while I went about my minimal food preparation in the kitchen. Oven on, packaging off... “Why are you still living up here?” he said, a rough little catch in his voice I'd never heard before. “I'd have thought... Wouldn't it be better if you had somewhere on the ground floor?”

I could tell him, here in the kitchen with my back to him. For the first time it was clear in my own mind. “I never accepted what happened to me. I was scared to have the second op, but I've kept on living like I was going to. Giving this place up would have meant that I'd made up my mind.”

“Have you?”

“Not yet. There's things I can do even like this that I never realised. I've... got used to it, I suppose, though I never thought I'd hear myself say that. It's just the pain.”

The sofa creaked. I'd lived here long enough to know the meaning of each little noise. I didn't turn, but I stood waiting tensely. I felt his warmth behind me, very close.

“Vince. Let me help you. I've got so much to make up to you for, and... I made a fortune out there, opening car doors for my senator.”

Not what I'd expected. His hand on my shoulder, maybe, or his mouth on the back of my neck. “I don't need money. I'd get the surgery on the NHS. Or if I had to do it privately, the department would cover the cost.”

“I don't mean that. I mean afterwards. If they tried, and it didn't work out, I could... I could look after you. I'd get a job over here, and we could share a place. I could support you.”

I stared at the wall, at the constellation of Blu Tack patches where I'd once stuck my target-shoot certificates and timing notes for personal best on the assault course. This was Jack, who couldn't be trusted to look after his mum's tropical fish while she was away, let alone a disabled human being. And he was sincere. The force of his offer hit me square on. I turned to face him, but I couldn't meet his eyes. My own were prickling, my throat sore. "Jacky, it's late. I should get some sleep."

"Oh. Right. Yeah, of course—I'll go."

"No. You'll scare your mam to death, turning up at this hour. Finish that bottle of scotch, and have your pie when it's ready. Stay here."

"On the sofa, right?"

"Right. I'd sleep there myself, but I'd have to be stretchered off in the morning. And... And other reasons."

"Shit." The word was very soft, but I heard the nuances. Realisation—an unspoken question answered. He stepped away from me, went back into the living room. His arms were folded over his chest, his head bowed. "Shit!" he said more fervently after a minute. "I knew it. I just bloody knew!"

I was far from sure myself. "Knew what?"

"That I shouldn't have taken my eye off the ball. Shouldn't have turned my back—not on a man like you. I've missed you, haven't I?"

"I don't understand."

"For God's sake, Vince. You found somebody else."

"No. At least... I don't think so. Very probably not." I paused, struggling to work out the changes inside myself, the gears that had irrevocably switched. "I'm just not free any more."

"*Shit.*"

"I didn't think you'd mind." The second I'd said it, I was ashamed. His eyes met mine, full of hurt. "I mean, I didn't think you felt—"

"No. You're dead right. I didn't. We were fucking, and that was great, and I loved you as my mate and my partner, but I never gave what you were giving. I know that."

"Jack, don't."

"You think I couldn't see? I knew you had more invested than I did." I blinked at *invested*: he certainly had been to therapy. Then he blushed and reverted to type. "But I just kept... throwing my leg over the problem."

“Well, if you're good at something... I never had any complaints.”

“But you wanted more. And now you've got it.”

“I don't know what I've got. C'mon, mate. It might be cocktail time in LA, but for me it's two in the morning.”

“Do you have to work?”

“Not till late. I'm doing graveyards for Bill.”

“Okay. Can we have breakfast together, then? To make things feel more normal?”

I nodded. Nothing normal about that proposal, though—on our rare nights together, breakfast had consisted of a shag in the shower then a panicked run for the door with coffee mugs still in our hands. “That would be nice.”

He sat quietly while I fetched him sheets and a blanket from the bedroom. When I moved to shake them out and make up the sofa, though, he stopped me, taking them from me and doing it himself. “I keep meaning to ask,” he said. “Why is there a plainclothes sergeant downstairs? Just as well he remembered me. Even then I practically had to show him my passport.”

“Oh, I'm a closely guarded witness these days. Me and Bill Hodges caught a great big fish the other day—Val Foster, no less.”

He paused in unfolding the blanket. He looked me up and down as if he'd never seen me before, and gave a low whistle. “You never did. Get you, Robocop!”

“I didn't exactly tackle her personally into the dirt, but... Yeah, it was a good bust. I'll tell you all about it over breakfast.”

“Tell me now.” His eyes glimmered. “You can talk while I screw you. Old times' sake, lover? No strings, I promise.”

I sighed. He still could make heat gather in me, stiffen my cock in my jeans. Grateful I'd untucked my shirt, I leaned against the wall and looked at him. “Get your arse onto that couch and forget about mine for tonight, will you?”

“Okay. I could kick myself, though, Vince. I really could.”

\* \* \*

We both slept late. He was jetlagged, and my dreams over the past fortnight had been so vivid and sweet I was never in a hurry to wake up from them. By the time we met in the kitchen, sheepish and rumpled, it was nearer to lunchtime than breakfast, and he said he'd take me out.

We ended up in my favourite restaurant, a smart Greek taverna round the corner from the Bigg Market. The place was expensive, a real treat on a copper's pay, but Jack made it clear to me I didn't have to think about that. I was sleepy still, oddly relaxed, and I didn't protest. I felt as if holes had closed up in me, ragged-edged wounds that had bled since that night on the quayside. Jack wore his aviators and a white open-necked linen shirt, and all the waiters stared. I'd used to worry when we were out together and he turned on all his lights like this, wondering how I looked at his side.

If I had my doubts today, he didn't share them. I had his entire attention. He opened the restaurant door for me, pulled out a chair. He listened open-mouthed to my edited highlights from the capture of Val Foster, poured me a second shot of ouzo while we waited for our mezes; picked out the nicest black olives for me when they came.

In fact he was courting me assiduously. The weirdness of that should have woken me up, but the winter sun blazed warmly through the glass into the corner where we sat, and the ouzo was good. There were classily rendered prints on the walls of figures from Greek pottery and vases. Sunburnt boys danced lithely with white-robed maidens and with one another. The lads were short on clothes, and their naked backsides made me think of Rowan's charcoal sketches. I'd struggled to see myself in those. But Rowan had, and here I was now, with handsome Jack Monroe doing everything but play footsie with me underneath the table. Maybe the pale, unprepossessing creature I could see in the mirror over the bar wasn't the whole story after all. Jack had run from me because he'd been scared, not because I hadn't been worth saving.

His toes brushed over my ankle. I spilled a little of the ouzo, then steadied myself and sat up. He had propped his chin on his hands and was watching me closely. It wasn't his old look of not taking no for an answer. "I wonder what it would take," he said thoughtfully, "to get you to forgive me. Not about the shooting—before that. For not knowing a good thing when I had it."

The fiery drink on an empty stomach was blurring the edges of my world. I allowed myself to picture it—so much of my old life returned to me. Jack's humour and companionship, all that great sex, this time served up with love... It made for a hell of a picture, the cover of a glossy gay lifestyle magazine. We'd be emerging from the registry office, laughing for the cameras, the ink still wet on our civil union paperwork, white roses fresh in our buttonholes.

A siren wailed once in the distance. I background-analysed the sound, my conscious brain still occupied with Jack and his wild new potentials. It wasn't one of ours. A fire engine coming up on traffic, that was, giving a warning cry. Another joined in, so much closer it had to be a different unit. The roses and confetti vanished from my brain, and I turned in my seat to look out of the window. First one and then another red truck raced past the restaurant, forcing buses and taxis up onto the kerb. They screeched round the corner and into the Bigg Market. I listened, frowning. They could be going anywhere, of course. But if they were en route to the quayside or one of the bridges, the sirens should be fading out by now.

I pushed my chair back from the table. "That sounds like trouble."

Jack had been watching me, not the street. He was a big kid about planes, boats and cars, and at any other time I'd have been flattered that I interested him more than a pair of speeding fire trucks. "Yeah. Not your trouble, though. Look, here's a couple of units from Mansion Street now." The police cars shot past, and neither did their sirens fade. Outside on the pavement, people were beginning to turn and follow the sound.

"I think I'll just go and take a look."

"Why? They'll call you if they want you in, won't they?"

I couldn't wait around to reply. Probably a chip pan was on fire in one of the many kebab shops around Half Moon Chambers. Maybe it was an exercise. Bill Hodges loved those, and since his promotion had sent men and vehicles chasing to all corners of the city. I dumped my napkin into the olives and got up. In the doorway Jack caught up with me. He was gesturing to the waiter to hold our table, looking back regretfully at the main course just arriving there. "Vinnie, come on! Sit down."

"I just have to see."

He knew me pretty well. He probably recognised the quiet monotone which meant I was about to punch someone. "Okay, okay." He followed me

outside. “You know what your problem is? You're never off duty. You're a copper down to the bone, far more than I ever was.”

“Whatever.” I could smell smoke, acrid and strong. A third fire engine yowled past. That was the full inner-city complement. Bill never sent all his resources out on a drill. I looked up, and a black wing veiled the sun, turning the daylight sulphur-yellow. I set off with the crowd toward the Bigg Market. I knew where the smoke was coming from. Half Moon Chambers was ablaze.



## Chapter Fifteen

**P**olice officers were setting up a cordon across the Bigg Market junction. They were trying, anyway—it was lunchtime on a weekday, the streets thronged with the scared, bored and curious. I should have helped. Normally I'd have been waving my badge, shooing chickens, assuring them there was nothing to see despite the giant conflagration twenty yards down the road. Now I didn't give a fuck. If the stupid rubbernecks wanted to inhale smoke and die under tumbling masonry, let them. I dodged past two uniformed sergeants and ran down the cobbles.

The top floor was out of control. This inferno had deliberation, expertise written on it—flames like leaping killer whales were bursting from every window. The fire crews had ladders up, levelling three sets of hoses at the blaze, but I could see from here the fight was lost. There was a stink of accelerant. The flats would be consumed—would tumble, plasterwork and paint and bright Art Deco tiles, into the floors below. Painted walls, human flesh and bone...

I ran into a human barricade. I hadn't seen the two firemen converging on me, a solid block of muscle and protective turnout gear. I scrabbled for my badge. "I've got to get in there."

"Not a chance, mate."

"I'm police. I've got a witness on the top floor. I've got to—"

"I don't care if you're the Dalai bloody Lama. No-one goes in." The firefighter holding me took a cursory look at my badge, and I tried to plunge between him and his colleague. He grabbed me, hauling me back. "I'm sorry, all right? There's no-one left alive on that floor."

There was a time for brutal honesty. I knew it well enough myself. It worked better on desperate family and friends than soothing lies. I heard it, took it in, but my body wouldn't listen—shuddered in the fireman's bruising grip and convulsively tried again. "Let me go!"

"Vinnie!" A hand closed on the collar of my coat. "Jesus Christ, what are you doing?"

"Do you know him?"

"Yeah. He's Detective Sergeant Carr, out of Mansion Street. He's..." Jack dragged me away from the firemen. "I don't know what's going on

with him. Vince, what the hell is the matter?”

I broke away. *No-one left alive on that floor.* There was no-one left alive at all, no-one alive in the shell of myself, the ribcage and skull and lungs that had made up an entity called Vince and now were just rattlebag fragments, breathing and aching on their own. I sat down hard on the kerb, my scarecrow bones folding up.

“Vince! Bloody talk to me!”

Poor Jack—he'd thought he had a chance with me. For a sunny half hour on another planet, mildly drunk and spaced out, the thing called Vince had thought about letting him try. Revelation swept through me, a raking force like lightning. I'd given my last chance away weeks ago. When had it gone from me? In a painted chamber high above this street, far beyond the reach of the firemen's tallest ladder, crumbling already under its fishtail tiles? In the dirty alley over the road, when a hand had closed on mine and dragged me out of the fight, then round the back of Half Moon Chambers and up through the rat-run, the drop-down stairs and the balconies...

The stairs. I scrambled up, having to use my hands to lever myself upright. Rowan wasn't stupid. When not set on self-destruct, his survival instincts were as good as mine: we'd recognised each other, two half-drowned cats in a barrel, caught between sink and swim. He was lean and strong, and if his own flat lacked a fire escape, he'd use his neighbour's. He wouldn't damn well sit and wait to burn.

I rushed the fire crew again. Uniformed police were in my way this time and caught me effortlessly, barely noticing my attempt. They might have been lads from Mansion Street—I wasn't really seeing them, any more than they were looking at me. I'd put myself on the other side of the line, become a distraught citizen, to be treated with courtesy and competent disdain. They were talking amongst themselves and didn't miss a beat while turning me round and dumping me back into Jack's arms. *Bloody lucky this happened on a weekday. Not many in the place—most of them out at work.*

I grabbed at Jack to steady myself. “He was due back at work yesterday. He might have gone back to work.”

“Good. That's very nice for him. Who?”

“Rowan. My witness, my...” My mobile was buried deep in the pocket of my jeans and I struggled to extract it, my fingers damp and numb. I scrolled down to his number and hit dial. “He was there when Val Foster

abducted me. He stopped them from hurting me. He saved me.” The line went dead, and my new hope tried to die with it. But Foster's gang had taken that handset from him, hadn't they? He might not have got it replaced.

I closed my eyes. I was a good copper. My mind retained numbers easily—registration plates, phones. I ransacked my data banks for the poster outside the gallery, the one I walked past every day. It appeared in red and black on my retina. Exhibition dates, website, Victorian cat snoozing on a windowsill between pots of geraniums, and finally the ten-digit string I needed. The first four were easy, just the local code. Breathing deep, I opened my eyes and punched them in, then the remaining six: held the mobile to my ear and listened.

The line rang and rang. A cold hypnosis took me, a fog of shock. I began to sway slightly in time with the dial-out tone. “Answer,” I whispered. “Answer, you shiftless bastards. Pick up the bloody phone.”

“Who are you trying to call?”

“The gallery. He works at the gallery.”

“The one down the road from your flat? The Langring?”

“Yes.” I stared at Jack. I was being stupid. The gallery was just down the road from my flat, and I could get home in ten minutes from here. It was a ten-minute walk. A five-minute run.

I turned and ran. I pelted out of the Bigg Market, jumping the police cordon without missing a stride. That put me onto Grainger Street, that elegant Regency stretch. Dead straight, aimed like an arrow into the centre of town. I took off blindly.

For the first hundred yards or so I did well. I'd used to beat Jack hollow on all our training sprints and charity marathons, and my mind had reverted to that time, taking my body with it. The traffic was grinding to a halt, so I left the kerb and the tangle of pedestrians and flew along the narrow gap between the two lanes of buses and cabs. Once clear of the smoke pall, air filled my lungs in great frosty gasps that felt like diamonds and glittered in my blood. I could run forever.

The plaza around Grey's Monument was unsheltered, open to bitter winds. I hadn't registered the cold, the ice that remained in gleaming sheets across the pavements even at midday. I hit the first of them full tilt and went flying, hurling out my hands to save myself. My brief flight ended in a bone-jarring crash at the foot of the monument steps, and the sun went dark.

\* \* \*

“Vinnie. Vince!”

I could still hear. Exclamations of surprise were popping out of the crowd around me, and a few less sympathetic cackles from kids. It was best I kept my face where it was, buried in the crook of my elbow. I'd be okay if I didn't breathe. Familiar footsteps slapped on the pavement nearby, then there was a scrape as Jack skidded to a halt beside me. “What the hell are you doing?”

I had to tell him. Had to keep on doing it. To that end I had to lift my head, sit up, inhale. “Gallery. Got to... get there.”

“Okay. Then for fuck's sake let me get you a cab.”

“No good. Not in this traffic.”

“Give us your badge. I'll commandeer one across the square.” I couldn't unclench my fists, and he reached into my jacket. We looked nothing alike but people seldom glanced past the insignia. “God, you're a mess. Hang on.”

I did. I knelt on the pavement, literally hanging on to the nothing I held in my fists. I was breathing now, but with hollow sucking sounds that mortified me. I could taste blood. The side of my face felt skinned raw but that was nothing—a tingle, a treat, a welcome distraction from the dull explosion taking place inside my spine. Through a field of red-green blotches I watched Jack run back to me. The taxi was coming after, picking a cautious route across the pedestrianised square.

He hoisted me up. “You okay?”

“You know that... screaming like a bitch I talked about?”

“Yeah.”

“That's what I'm doing inside.”

His arms were warm and strong and he held me a second longer than I needed him to, but I understood what he was offering: briefly hid my face on his shoulder and let go a single muffled howl. Okay. Now I could contain the rest. “Come on.” I glanced at the apprehensive-looking driver. “Let's go, if your cabbie will have me in the car.”

“You're bleeding like a pig. I wouldn't have you in mine.”

He hustled me into the back seat, followed me there and gave the driver orders to get to the Langring, speed restrictions lifted for this special

occasion. The roads on the far side of the plaza were clear. Once we were moving, I fell back. This was the worst jarring I'd given myself in a while. I drove my fingertips into the plastic upholstery, trying to accommodate the pain, let it run through me. Fighting it was useless. I was useless in its grasp. "I've decided."

"What?"

"The second op. I've got to have it. If it puts me in a wheelchair outright, then—all right. At least I'll know. But I can't be stuck like this. I have to be able to get to him if he needs me."

Jack handed me a napkin from the restaurant. "To Rowan, I'm guessing."

"Yeah. If there's any chance at all. I have to be able to run."

"And Rowan's why you're not free any more."

I nodded. I couldn't speak. I'd have been kinder, found some words, but the gallery was in sight now, cupola gleaming richly in the sun. Making the gap disappear was all I cared about. Jack told the cabbie to run us right up to the door, and never mind the bluebell-carpet pavement. I had some command over my limbs now. I half-fell out into the shining blue mist, hauled myself upright and slipped through the glass doors into the foyer.

Some instinct made me move quietly. The normal crowd was milling round the gallery shop, looking dubiously at its efforts to reduce Van Gogh to trinkets. They were fine.

But the desk staff caught my eye. Their movements were just slightly off. Self-conscious, stiff. The girl at the cash register in particular... The doors hissed behind me and I gestured to Jack to slow down, to see what I was seeing. It was the same kid who'd tried to give Rowan the heads-up last time I'd been here. She looked as if she'd failed again. She was wrapping up some keyrings and fridge magnets for a grinning little boy, but her attention wasn't on him: her body language screaming out a message concerning the man propped casually against the counter, leafing through a catalogue. I couldn't see his right hand.

I turned to Jack, as if for casual conversation. We'd been a very good team. He picked me up instantly, pulling some change from his pocket as if we needed to buy postcards for the folks back home. He said softly, "Weapon?"

"Yeah. Behind the leaflet stand. Bastard's got her point-blank."

“Whole town's falling apart today. I'll take this one. You go round the back, see if you can find your lad.”

I'd have argued, but he looked the tourist part, and I had just nosedived onto concrete. I was close enough to half-lipread, half-overhear the conversation at the desk. The girl had finished with her customer now and was standing rigidly, staring into space. The others were going about their business with desperate assiduity. I could patch together what the guy with the catalogue was saying to her. *Keep it calm. We only want him, okay? Just Rowan. Once we're done...*

Jack smiled. It was a hell of a smile now, amped up with US orthodonty and set off by his tan. “Oh, my God,” he declared, with what I hoped was creditable West Coast enthusiasm. “Honey, look! We've *got* to get one of those for Auntie Jane.” He swept up to the counter, attention fixed on some invisible gadget against the back wall. The girl stared at him helplessly. “That one,” he said to her, pointing. “Right at the very back. Can you get one out for me?” I saw the gunman's tiny nod of permission, saw how Jack waited till she had retreated to the shelves and given him enough safe distance. Her hands shook on the boxes and she knocked one down. “Oh, dear,” Jack went on sympathetically. “Honey, can't you see it? I'll pop round and get it myself.”

Dangerous. Deadly, if he got his timing wrong. But he'd always been a talented bastard, with just the right dash of insanity to pull off a stunt. I crept along the back of the shop, concealing my grazes as best I could. Just as I reached the steps up into the exhibition halls, he made his move. The counter had a hatch the staff could raise to let themselves in and out: he got a hand underneath it, slammed it upward and into the gunman's face.

Chaos exploded among the John Martin postcards and *I heart art* mugs. The poor hostage girl, released from gunpoint, began to shriek like a car alarm. The gunman flew backover into a book stand. Jack leapt after him. He got the drop and knocked the weapon clear, but his opponent was a big bastard and a fistfight broke out in the avalanche of paperbacks. I was pretty sure Jack would not only win but enjoy it, and I ran far enough up the steps to be seen. He'd given me back my badge. Waving it, I waited till enough of the crowd were looking. “Police! Clear the shop.” I didn't want a stampede. “Nice and calm, please. There's no danger.” As if in flat

contradiction, a gunshot instantly cracked out from inside the building. “Go!” I yelled. “Don't bloody trample. Use both doors.”

Jack sat up from his tussle long enough to indicate the weapon that had skittered to the foot of the steps. “Grab it! I'm okay here. I'll get backup.” A look passed between us. He could have used the pistol himself. I knew why he was leaving it to me. The gunman writhed beneath him and fetched him a slap round the jaw. “Ooh, you sod. Vince, go!”

## Chapter Sixteen

I ran into the exhibition hall. It was my niece Lily's favourite, the glassware. There was certainly a hell of a lot of it about—I skidded on a constellation of shards from the shattered display case. The jellyfish monsters, vases and plates and eye-popping Victorian fantasies, sat unshielded on their shelves. Behind them on the parquet floor was Rowan—my Rowan, fragile artist, curator, collector of books and delicate Far Eastern antiquities—locked in a scrap with a crop-headed thug twice his size. They were rolling like weasels, limbs tangled. A second gunman was circling them, plainly trying to decide whether to put a bullet through his mate in order to finish off the prey.

I could help him choose. I strode up behind him, tucked the muzzle of my borrowed weapon into the back of his skull. “Not today,” I rasped, and grabbed his arm as he began his startled switch-round turn. “Drop it.” I hadn't brought cuffs out with me for a stroll in the city and a nice Greek lunch. I didn't like clubbing people round the head with guns, but it did beat shooting them, and I braced and clobbered him down.

Rowan and his dance partner hit another cabinet. It toppled and shattered, sending fragments flying to my feet. I grabbed the discarded weapon. Now I was armed to the teeth, and I stood no more chance than the man I'd just disabled of getting a decent shot. I didn't want to shout at them to freeze. The second thug was armed too, most of Rowan's efforts going into stopping him from drawing the gun. I edged around the sea of broken glass. Neither of them had seen me yet—maybe I could just leap in...

There was no need. Rowan surged up from under and knocked his opponent's skull hard off the floor. Then he straddled him. A big Venetian vase lay within arm's reach. It was a beauty, thick violet glass streaked with gold, somehow intact after its fall. Centuries old. Rowan grabbed it. He lifted it high in both hands.

At last he saw me. He looked as if he'd been on a long hard road-trip to hell. There were shadows under his eyes, marks of a life-and-death struggle that made this current fistfight look like puppies brawling in a basket. He didn't smile at me. His face didn't alter at all, but still a transformation took it. He focussed, intensified. His lights came on. He had no idea whatsoever



how my own were blazing up in response. In my mind right until now I'd fought the image of him burning, trapped and lost in Half Moon Chambers. I couldn't speak, not even to say his name.

The half-stunned thug tried to sit up. Rowan glanced between him and the beautiful vase. "Vince," he said. "This is too good for him. Catch."

I grabbed the vase out of mid-air. It had been a good throw, powerful and accurate. Rowan fetched his man a solid roundhouse punch instead, and sat back gasping. For a moment he closed his eyes. Then he got up and stood unsteadily. Fragments of glass pattered out of his hair and slithered off his clothing. He brushed the worst of it away. Then he turned and walked away into the shadows.

He wasn't fragile. Vulnerable, yes, but that was a different thing. I looked at the great big lad he'd just put down, sleeping beatifically in the broken glass. I remembered an arm going round me as I struggled up the stairs of my building—fine and lean and tough as steel. I allowed myself to see in my mind's eye the battle that must have gone on in his cell at St Mary's. I hadn't dared look until now. I'd watched my brother in the throes of withdrawal, and a dozen others like him. I knew what it took to survive.

He'd set off towards the restoration rooms. Tourists were clustering in the exhibition hall. I set the vase down and dodged between them, aiming for the double doors I'd first opened a lifetime ago, when the world had been nothing to me but a concrete desert where I lived alone. I pushed them wide apart now. "Rowan?"

He was standing with his back to me. He'd been working on an empty frame, a huge tarnished medieval thing propped against the wall. Had that been the price the gallery boss had demanded for letting him keep his job? Half of the frame was dingy, the rest restored to softly gleaming gold. Rowan had a pot of gilding in one hand, a brush in the other. As I watched, he took up position in front of the far wall. His stance was assessing, thoughtful, as if confronting an enemy or the oldest friend he had, a friend lost to him for so long he couldn't be sure of his allegiance.

The wall was panelled in dark wood. The first stroke of the gilding leapt out across it. He said, distinctly, "This is for Val Foster."

I didn't understand. The only reward she deserved was the twenty-year sentence the judge would hand down at her trial—much reduced on account of her plea, but good enough to smash her empire apart. Behind me,

frightened visitors were starting to gather. I thrust out an arm across the doorway. Sirens were howling in the street outside. I hoped to God Jack was all right. I knew I should go and check, but I couldn't tear myself away.

“And this is for Goran Maric. This is for the first time I put their fucking filth in my veins.”

I got it now. Rowan was painting. The golden landscape rising on the gallery wall, the golden man emerging from its centre, were more vivid even than the scenes in Half Moon Chambers, and he was working clean. Lucidly clear and sober. He threw me one incandescent glance then plunged on. The first wall wasn't big enough. Another gilded angel sprang up on the second, reaching out both hands towards his friend. “For the first time I carried. For every time they made me. Every time I *let* them.”

He was furious. I could feel his heat from where I stood. This was his vengeance on the world that had devoured him, the only redress he need seek. He moved in a blur and the sun burst over the dreamscape mountains, lighting the whole room. This was how I'd seen him in the basement car park—reaching so hard and high for his art that he had to dance. And it was all just him.

“Clyde! What in the name of *God* do you think you're doing?”

I spun round. Rowan had an audience now, a gaggle of open-mouthed punters who probably thought he was an installation of some kind. In front of them stood a plump little man in a suit, his face puce with disbelief. He had to be the manager, eyes popping out of his skull at the outrage being perpetrated on his gallery's walls. I smiled. For the second time that day I pulled my badge. “You'll have to step back, sir. Mr Clyde is helping us with our enquiries.”

Rowan finished his work. He dropped the paint can where he stood, and one final gold streak shot out across the floor, a comet or a coda or a fiery full stop. He looked at me. “It was for everything they did to me, Vince,” he said, his breath coming raggedly. “Everything I did to myself. Oh, my God, you're bleeding. What happened to you?”

He was human again. I opened my arms. He came across the floor to me in long swift strides. He crashed against me hard and I cried out then broke into laughter—we would always hit each other at full speed, and that wouldn't matter; we would conjoin pain and passion and never mind the

bruising. I clutched him tight, hauling in a lungful of his scent, grabbing a handful of his hair. "Jesus! I thought you were dead!"

"Yes, love. So did I."

"No, I mean..." I shut up. No good trying to explain to him here that his home was gone, everything he possessed. Anyway he didn't give me time. He seemed oblivious to his boss, the crowd, and I forgot them too as he pushed me back from him, staring into my face. It was only for a moment. Then he took my jaw between his hands and pressed his mouth to mine.

\* \* \*

I led him away. I tried to, anyway, but after a couple of steps it was clear that he was leading me. The crowd parted for us. They didn't seem fazed. Maybe they thought the artist always came and kissed some man from the audience at the end of his display. The manager remained on his spot as if cast in wax, the only moving part of him his goldfish mouth. I had golden handprints on my jacket. I was laughing over this, my arm wrapped tight round Rowan's waist, when we stumbled straight into Jack.

He was close enough to have seen. Any hope that he'd missed it vanished when I met his eyes. I'd never imagined how he would look when cut to the bone with hurt. To my shame I hadn't thought him capable. I wanted to wipe out his pain, but that comfort was no longer mine to give him; would have been a lie and a betrayal. "Jack," I said awkwardly. "This is..."

"Rowan," Jack finished for me. "Your, er... Your witness. Good. Are you both okay?"

"Fine. Rowan, this is Jack Monroe. He used to work with me."

"Brad Pitt," Rowan said softly, as if to himself. Someone somewhere had taught him nice manners and his clasp of Jack's hand was generous and unreserved. He'd been holding me firmly round the shoulders. Now he released me, as if I'd been stolen goods. "Nice to meet you."

"You too. Er... Brad Pitt?"

Footsteps echoed on the wooden floor, began to crunch in glass. Four uniformed officers appeared at the end of the gallery, one of them peeling off to deal with Rowan's gunman, still sprawled like a whale amid the glimmering shards. "Cavalry?" I asked, glad of the interruption. I hadn't let

go of Rowan's waist, and I could feel him tense beneath my arm, ready to step away. To surrender. I tightened my hold.

"Yeah. Better late than never."

"Did you sort out your lad downstairs?"

"Course. We broke a couple of souvenir snow globes, but nothing compared with your performance up here. And the girl's okay."

"The girl?" Rowan looked up. "Rachel, in the shop?"

"Yeah. Police doc's having a look at her, but she was just scared."

"Why would she be—"

"Rowan," I interrupted him. "The guys who came here today—they were dead serious. They took your friend hostage to stop anyone else getting through, but Jack got her out of it, okay?"

He swallowed. "Okay." He glanced between me and Jack. "She's nice. She always kept a lookout for me, if people like them came, or..."

"Or people like me." I waited till his attention was fixed on me again—until a faint, questioning smile lit up the fear and resignation in his eyes. "Listen. They didn't just try to get at you here. They started at Half Moon Chambers. There was a fire, and..."

I couldn't do it. The place had been the whole world to him. I'd only spent one night there, and I was dismayed at the loss of it. Jack laid a hand on my arm. "Get him out of here," he said. "Tell him before these big flat-footed plods from Mansion Street do. I'll head them off, and I'll send a car round the back for you in five minutes or so."

There were fire doors a few yards away. I looked back once at Jack as I shepherded Rowan through, but he was walking to meet the officers, hands extended in that disarming gesture I knew so well. I loved him—always would—but he was falling away from me into an irretrievable past, and my own hands were full, the future bursting on me moment by moment, bright and uncontrollable as fireworks.

Rowan spun to face me the instant the doors closed. We were in a narrow passageway, almost nose to nose. "You came to save me."

"Yes. To try, anyway. I wasn't sure you were here. But your flat was gone, and..." I shuddered, leaning my brow against his. "You had to be here. You had to be."

"My flat... There was a fire?"

“Yeah. God, I'm so sorry. A complete rip-through. They used an accelerant, and—”

“Was anybody hurt?”

“The fire crews didn't think so. Most people were out. But all your books and paintings, Rowan—your murals...”

“Bugger the murals.” I eased back a bit to look at him. He was smiling tremulously. “I can do more of those.”

“Yes. It looks as though you can. What happened?”

“I don't know. When I ran into those bastards in the glass rooms, I just thought—I'm never gonna get away, no matter who I testify against. No matter how sorry I am. For years I'd accepted that—you know, that I *deserved* to spend the rest of my life on the run, or on my knees. Then I thought about you, and something snapped.”

I chuckled convulsively. “I can have that effect.”

“No, stupid. Everything you'd done to haul my arse out of other fires, like *you* didn't think I was worthless. Being with you. Wanting to be with you again.” He brushed his fingertips over my face, carefully skirting the damage. “And I was so bloody furious that they weren't gonna let me. I didn't wait for them to come after me.”

“No. I gathered that. You're a suicidal fucking idiot, you know—they were armed.”

“I didn't care. I wanted my life back and I grabbed it. And then I...”

“And then you could paint.”

“Yes. God, yes!” He squeezed my shoulders. “I could paint, and I could love you.”

“You did both. Right in front of your boss.”

He frowned. “My boss was there?”

“Oh, Rowan.”

I cupped his skull to kiss him. He was shaking finely, tears of reaction starting to spill. Their salt was rich in my mouth. His tongue met mine and we clutched one another. I could taste my own blood, and a coppery terror of loss that faded as I got both arms round him, pressing him up against the wall. Anyone else who wanted to hurt him would have to go through me. When we were both breathless, heat flaring in the places where we touched, he pulled away. “The only thing I'll miss from the flat... I wish I had the sketches of you. The ones I did while you were asleep.”

“You can do more of those too.”

“Can I?” He stroked my spine, ran a hungry caress down to my backside. “Will I get the chance? Your partner - whatever happened between you, he's nuts about you now. I could see it. Don't you want—”

“Rowan, I want you.” One day I would tell him how my life had almost ended outside Half Moon Chambers in the smoke. “Just you. Come home with me.”

## Chapter Seventeen

I didn't know what had woken me. Probably only a slither of pigeons on the roof tiles, but I was instantly wide awake, pulse racing. I got out of bed, slipped into my jeans and a shirt. My weapon was hanging off the back of the bedroom door. I shrugged into the harness. One glance at the rumpled bed behind me told me everything was right with that part of my world, and I padded downstairs.

The locks were secure, the windows intact. I came down a bit off my alert, but there was still the garden. God knew it would offer little cover to intruders, one patch of balding grass and an exhausted lilac bush as it was. Nevertheless I opened the back door and went out.

The night was unseasonably mild. This happened sometimes in the winter city. Warm air would steal in from somewhere, just enough to lure spring scents from the soil. Then the frosts would snap back down, extinguishing hope for another month or two. I breathed in a lungful of fresh leaves and car exhaust. This was a grim neighbourhood, the house and its patch of lawn just one in a grey sea of nearly identical others, so bare of distinguishing features that I had to remember the number and count back to it from the end of the street when I'd been out for milk and a paper. Perfect for a safe house.

Of course I hadn't been allowed to carry Rowan off to my box in the sky. When Bill Hodges had got hold of us and heard the news about the gallery and Half Moon Chambers, he'd turned into a ferocious hen with one chick, or maybe two, and called time on half measures of surveillance and arm's-length escort. Rowan had been packed off into protective custody. He didn't own a thing except the clothes he stood up in, but Bill had seen to all that, sending a constable shopping for him, contacting the authorities to reconstruct his basic paperwork. The trial was only five days away. The police department of Newcastle upon Tyne had brought down Val Foster, Bill had declared, pacing the squad room. Damned if it couldn't keep one skinny witness in one piece until he reached the stand. He ordered round-the-clock supervision, a total blackout on the media. The one concession he made was that, since I too was a witness under threat, I might as well share the same safe house. That way one officer in a car out the back and another

keeping watch from a bedroom in the house opposite might do for both of us. Hot-shot Chief Inspector as he was now, he had reminded me, he still had a budget to watch.

“Vince?”

I turned, tucking away my gun. The back door had creaked gently open. Rowan was standing on the step, his eyes wide and wary, full of the luminous spring night. I'd left him curled up in a pair of striped pyjama bottoms my granddad might wear, and the T-shirt he'd pulled on was emblazoned with the dates of Lady Gaga's last tour, not to mention an unflattering screen-print portrait of the diva herself. God alone knew what the shopping constable had been thinking. He still looked like sleep-tousled heaven. “Hi,” I said. “I thought I heard something. But everything's all right.”

He came down the frost-cracked garden path and took my outstretched hand. We were both barefoot, which was stupid. I led him to the garden bench beneath the lilac. Its slats were moss-eaten but it must have been nice once, a pattern of sunflowers in cast iron across its back. “How are you doing? I'm sorry I woke you up.”

“That's okay. I didn't think I'd sleep at all tonight.”

“Yeah. Big day tomorrow.”

“But I practically dropped into a coma, after you'd finished...”

He broke off. His face was close to mine, and I felt the warmth of his blush. We were at a stage of such wild-abandon intimacy in the bedroom that even talking about it anywhere else had become painfully awkward. We'd been in seclusion for five fraught nights. In the featureless bedroom upstairs, we'd brought down the men from the Half Moon Chambers painted walls, embodied and made them real. Our days had been almost as shocking in their domestic detail. Nothing to do whilst waiting for a trial to come on. Neither of us cared much for cards or Harold Robbins novels or any of the other safe-house amusements provided. We were allowed out but only one at a time, and only as far as the corner shops, our loyal plainclothes guardians loitering nearby. We couldn't have been thrown more completely together if we'd been stuck in a lift. It was a baptism of fire in relationship terms. We should have been awkward, uneasy.

Instead we'd sat together on the lumpy 1960s sofa, and we'd talked, or kept silence, and he'd rested his shoulder against mine and the hours had



rushed away. We'd taken turns to cook, or at any rate he had cooked and I had heated things up from tins. Evening light had faded to black while we ate, and then the kitchen table had become the arena for our silences, our low-voiced exchanges. I'd held his hands across the stained melamine surface. More time had melted to nothing, swallowing us up into another night.

"I don't want to leave here," Rowan said. "Which is odd, considering what a shithole it is."

I nodded. Bauhaus it wasn't. Nor was it a chamber of dreams sailing out across the city in a baroque ocean liner. Houses like these were how my parents had lived. I'd tried so hard to distance myself from the dirt, from Phil and petty crime and squalor. I'd forgotten the lilacs needed the dirt to live. "It's a dump," I agreed. "But somewhere like this would do. Wouldn't it?"

He looked at me. As usual I shivered slightly under the impact. Stripped of fear, his gaze met a place in me that felt like my soul. Made me feel like I *had* one, alive and well in spite of everything. "Would do for what?"

"Well—for us. Not in this part of town but up near Jesmond Dene, maybe. With a bit of a garden, and room for you to paint."

His pupils dilated. "You want me to live with you?"

"When all this is over. Will you think about it?" I shrugged. He might as well hear it all. He'd certainly seen most of it over the past few nights. I couldn't have surrendered further. I had grazes on my palms from clutching the base of the bedhead, laid out on my back while he fucked me. "To be honest, I've been racking my brains to think how the hell I'd live without you."

He shifted lithely, straddled me on the bench. He had the advantage in all our erotic manoeuvres, and he'd used it so kindly, so thoroughly, that I'd almost forgotten my limitations. "Vince," he whispered, diving down to kiss the side of my neck. "Oh, God, yes. A place like this would do."

"That's settled, then." He was making me hard. I wouldn't have believed it after our earlier collision. I could manage fine, we'd discovered, if he braced on his hands and knees for me, if I could hang on to that hard-worked headboard. It slammed the bed frame off the wall, but the house next door was empty. Yes, he'd almost made me forget... "Listen," I said,

escaping his kisses for a moment. “You know I’m booked in for my surgery.”

“Yeah. We’ll be okay. No matter what happens—we’ll cope, love.”

“I don’t mean wheelchair ramps and bath seats. I mean there’s a real chance—bigger than I ever told you—that it might snip the wires completely. I might not be able to...” Why couldn’t I just say it? Our harassed school biology teacher had yelled at us that if we couldn’t use the right words, we shouldn’t even be thinking of doing it. “I might be impotent.”

He sat back. He was holding his weight off me on his strong thighs, but the brush of his arse against my lap was maddening. He tilted his head a little, and I’d learned what that meant—he was taking on board all his facts, coming to a conclusion. “I told you. We’ll cope.”

“Think what you’re saying. I wouldn’t tie you to me, Rowan. Not if—”

“It’s been a weird few days for me, Vince. I never thought I’d find talking to a bloke as good as fucking him.” Again we both rocked a bit under the word. We’d given it back its punch, I supposed, its force and meaning. He grinned, his face bright and intense as a fox’s in the starlight. “In its own way, of course. I’m not saying we shouldn’t make the most of you... while you’re there.”

I fell back. I rested my head on the crumbling brickwork behind the bench and looked through the mesh of lilac twigs into the night sky. We were still deep in winter. Orion was still in mid-leap across the zenith, Sirius flashing off infinite colours in the space between the brickworks and the power-station cooling towers. No way I should be warm enough in a thin cotton shirt, but I felt as if anyone in orbit round the Dog Star might be able to see me too, a fire on chilly planet Earth. And Rowan too seemed to have lost his dislike of the cold, or to have other things on his mind.

He knelt over me. He pulled my shirt back, flicked with his tongue at the sensitive bony crest of my shoulder. Heat blazed through me, right down to the arches of my feet, my heels and toes where I was pushing against the flagstones. He settled his backside against my crotch. “You know our angels?” he whispered.

I did. They changed shifts twice a day, front-street copper and back-street copper. “What about them?”

“Reckon they can see through that fence?”

“Don't think so. They'd only be bothered if someone came over it.” If anybody did, I too was ready. Even once Val Foster had been sent down, I knew I'd still keep the watch. I'd always have Rowan's unguarded back for him. “Why?”

“You know why.”

This garden was an unlikely Eden. I undid the cord of his pyjama bottoms, and a cat yowled somewhere off in the distance as if in appreciation. Discarded beer tins littered the lawn. But the lilac was budding, flowerheads already formed. Here we were Rowan's painted young gods. He made golden vines spring for me out of the fence and the walls. He called up a divinity from my aching flesh—drew in his breath with pleasure when my cock strained beneath my jeans. I hadn't fastened all the buttons in my haste to get downstairs, and he opened the three I had with tender concentration. “Look at you.”

*Look at us.* I couldn't get the words out but I put down a hand and drew his shaft against mine. There was just enough streetlight and starlight to see. This far north you could have both, the city never vast enough to extinguish the stars. He pushed his fingers through mine, intertwining them, and we both closed our grip, completing the circuit. I arched my spine but he forbade me, pressing me down. “No. Don't hurt yourself. Just hold me, love. Hold us like that.”

He rocked powerfully over me. His movements drove our tight-pressed cocks together harder still. I cried out, and the damn cat yowled again. “Takes an alleyway tomcat to know one,” he managed, voice breaking up into laughter. I couldn't sort out the surge of arousal from the impulse to laugh back. It didn't matter. This was daily life with Rowan, where sex and absurdity would overlap, and nothing would be separate from anything else, and I wouldn't need to live in a sterile box up in the sky. I put my free hand round the back of his neck, buried my fingers in his hair. When we kissed I was still laughing, and high-voltage flashes of excitement burst in a storm all up and down my spine. I jerked my fist around the place of our conjoining. He took up the beat with me. Combined with the rocking it was almost unbearable, a tight-locked rack of pleasure I couldn't escape. He tore out of the kiss and I thought he would come: his head went back, his first wet heat spilling out across my hand. But then he leaned down over me again. He hid his face against my neck. “Fuck, I'm scared.”

I could barely answer. Nothing was separate, though, nothing convenient. Sex ran hand in hand with fear and love. “What is it? Tomorrow? The trial?”

“No. Scared... to come this hard. Turns me inside out, Vince!” A shudder ran through him, frantic and huge. His breath exploded against my ear. “I can't. I can't!”

“You can. I've got you.” But I wasn't sure on my own account. Too much, too hard, a wild heat like God trying to burst out through my mortal flesh. No help for either of us—I seized him, dragged his mouth back down. I stilled our double grip and we surged to mute immobility. His shaft leapt a bare heartbeat before mine. My yell would have woken the street—Orion would have heard it—except that my tongue was deep in Rowan's throat, his own cry meeting it, joining it and cancelling it out. We climaxed in silence, jetting over one another's wrists. I couldn't bear the sweetness of it. Not that much, not that perfect bestial divinity, flesh and soul forged into one, and no idea where I ended and he began, barriers as old as my life crashing down...

Something in me burned away to dust. We clung to one another. His head was still bowed to my shoulder, his ribs heaving as his breath slowed. I had to move, I knew. The air was dampening, chilling. My endless angry forward impulse had burned, my tireless will to be doing. Over the years it had driven me so far—out of my home, onto the streets in search of my own ideas of justice. I'd needed it, but now I looked back there was so much damn roadkill, so many things and people tossed aside. I couldn't make reparation. Just now I couldn't do anything but hold my beautiful man and watch the sky begin to shimmer with a first trace of dawn. Tomorrow—courtrooms, defence lawyers waiting to rip us apart. A fortnight after that, the hospital. I wanted to do it all, and I would, but just now I wanted to be still. There soon would be a dewfall frost. Maybe it would sculpt us painlessly in ice. Maybe we could turn to stone and stay here in the garden, the lilac and the straggling ivy covering us, the world none the wiser.

Rowan stirred. He planted a big, wrung-out kiss to my brow. “Somewhere... in the midst of all that... I think your phone was ringing.”

*So much for the world.* I grunted, shifting my backside far enough to pull my mobile out of my jeans. The combined bells of Notre Dame and Westminster could have been pealing directly over my head. With a sense

of creeping flashback I read the number off the screen. "It's my sister-in-law. Er, Chrissy—my brother's girlfriend."

"Your brother Phil?"

I nodded. Phil was gone, part of my roadkill, my unredeemable past. Without him and his nimbus of chaos, I couldn't imagine why Chrissy would be making a small-hours call. I remembered our last meeting, and inwardly cringed. I couldn't think why she'd ever want to speak to me again. "I'd better find out what's wrong."

"Want me to go?"

"No. God, no."

He settled down on the bench at my side and put his arm around me. I hit callback and waited. "Chrissy?"

"No. This is her mum. I'm just using her phone."

Fear grabbed me like a big fist. She'd been in despair when she'd stumbled out of my hospital room, and despair didn't help keep ex-junkies clean, no matter how hard they tried. Not that I'd ever checked. Not that I could even remember her surname. "Is she... Is she okay, Mrs..."

"Wilkinson," the tired voice finished for me, letting me off the hook. "You don't know me. Chrissy's all right. But she's just had a baby, a little girl, and for some reason she can't rest until you know."

"A baby... Phil's?"

"Yes, Phil's, Vincent. There was a lot wrong with my lass, but not that."

"I'm sorry. No."

"Anyway, she says she knows you won't be able to come. But if you do want to visit your niece at some point, she says you'll be welcome. She's still at her old flat."

The line went dead. My fingers had gone numb—I dropped the handset, and Rowan deftly caught it. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm an uncle again. Chrissy's had a baby. She must have been pregnant when I last saw her, but..." I tried to imagine her telling me then, in the midst of her rage and her grief. "It's a little girl. Chrissy says I can see her."

"And... that's good, isn't it?"

It was good. But the night was spinning round me, convulsing with change. I leaned into Rowan's warmth. He was skinny, but no-one in the world was more solid, more blessedly bloody real. "It's good. Will you

come with me? When... When the trial's over, and we're let out on the streets again.”

“I'd love to. What's she called?”

“Who?”

“The baby. Your niece.”

“I've no idea.”

He chuckled, his breath warm in my hair. “Oh, Vince, you are hopeless. You should've asked.”

“I suppose so. Come with me, then, and make sure I don't screw up any more. Oh, and I want you to meet Jane. She'll love you. So will the kids. Lily's the oldest. She's a firecracker, a right little handful, but she's so smart. She's...”

I wanted to go on. He was listening intently, as if he'd happily hear my family history, the bright parts and the dark, until I ran out of stories and relations. But something was crowding up my throat, a coppery pain, and I had to stop. I rested my brow on his shoulder. He moved to shield me. “Okay, love,” he said. “It'll all be all right. You'll see. Everything will be all right.”

## Chapter Eighteen

*January*

There was limited space in the Freeman hospital post-op. It was only coincidence that I'd ended up in my old room. But it wasn't helping.

The window framed the same group of birches and oaks whose summer foliage had swayed back and forth while I'd lain here wishing death on myself rather than get through my next five minutes of pain. Their pattern had become a hieroglyph for me of the unendurable. They were stripped of leaves today, but I could still read the message. The difference was that I didn't hurt now.

I didn't know if I still could.

Voices in the corridor. Both were familiar. One—my surgeon—had just finished a long, stern lecture at my bedside. I'd kept my eyes closed but apparently I hadn't been kidding him, because he'd expatiated in full detail on the damage I would do to myself if I didn't at least try to move my newly mended spine. If I hadn't been pretending to sleep, I could have told him a thing or two, starting with how willing he'd be to rush in and find out *he* couldn't move, or walk, or raise an erection for the beautiful new boyfriend with whom he'd been setting out on a new life. How soon he'd have wanted a final bloody verdict on that. He'd have lain like a bundle of leaf-stripped twigs in this bed, I reckoned, giving himself a last interval of terrified, blessed uncertainty.

"He came through the surgery fine, DCI Hodges. He should be awake and talking by now, and I do need him to try and get up. I'm not sure what the trouble is. He's quite unresponsive."

"Leave him to me."

Oh, great. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter. I'd have rolled to face the wall but even that—my success or failure with that endeavour—would have sealed my fate. I didn't have to look to know that Bill had come to stand by my bed. He always used the same aftershave, given to him each Christmas by his daughter and faithfully worn even though he didn't like it.

"For God's sake, DS Carr. This isn't like you."

That didn't warrant a reply. Everything that might or might not have been *like me* had gone out of the window since last summer. No-one should know that better than Bill, who had watched the transformation and tried to employ what was left.

"The doc needs you to try and move. He said you responded to the pain test."

*So would you, if someone jabbed you in the toe with the tip of a fucking scalpel.*

"But that's not enough for them to tell if the surgery's worked. They need you on your feet. For that matter..." A pause, and a scrape of a plastic chair across lino. My heart sank—he was settling down. "For that matter, I need you functional too. I'm not saying I could shove you back out with the drug squad, if you even wanted that. You'd have to retrain. But I've got a recruit for you."

I twitched. I hoped he hadn't seen. Jack and I had dodged recruits, the task of playing mentor to a rookie, ever since we'd won our posts at Mansion Street. If Bill was trying to get me out of bed, this wasn't the way to go about it.

"The guy's got me tearing my hair. I don't know how he qualified. He's good, but he's got an attitude on him you could bounce bloody stones off. He's practically a skinhead. Thinks everyone who ever touched so much as a joint ought to be locked up forever. I thought I'd try him on you."

My eyes flew open. "Why? Because I've got experience at being a prejudiced dickhead?"

The room was bright. The light stung me, bringing tears. There was my boss, arms folded, beaming in satisfaction. "I'd never have put it so bluntly. Good afternoon, Vince. Welcome back."

"Bill, you sod."

"Desperate times, son. Desperate measures."

"Does this rookie even exist?"

"I'm afraid he does. I'd have broken him to you gently, but the doc said you were malingering."

I was desperately thirsty. Now that he'd forced me to speak, my throat felt like a gravel pit. I gestured at the water jug and he poured me a glass.

"There you go. Sit up a bit and you can have some."



That was a poor trick to try on a hospital veteran. Glaring at him, I scooped up the remote control—I knew exactly where it was—and pressed the button to raise my back rest high enough. I thought for a second he was going to move the glass out of my reach, but he relented. “All right. Here you go. Now, what's the problem?”

I drank cautiously. My throat was sore from the intubation. I could still taste anaesthetic. “Do I really... have to tell you?”

“Well, I wouldn't normally pull rank on an injured man, but take it as an order if you like. Yes.”

All right. He'd asked for it. There wasn't much point in hiding from him anyway. He'd been close by my side all through the Foster trial, and Rowan had been close by mine. Val Foster would now be enjoying the start of her second month in captivity, and Bill had kept watch over us both while we put her there. Whatever he'd thought about one of his coppers falling in love with a witness, he'd had the grace not to say it, and God knew Rowan and I had been discreet. Bill had seen us in private, though—moments snatched between one court session and the next. “I don't bloody want to know,” I snarled. Bill only frowned at me, and I elaborated. “I don't want to know if I'm fixed—just in case I'm not.”

“Yes. I see. Well, that makes as little sense as anything I've ever heard.”

“You try it. No—never mind me. Try being the poor bastard stuck with me.”

“Vince, I'm honestly trying to understand you here.”

I knew he was. I took a deep breath. “All right. I lost Jack over this. That turned out... I want to say it turned out for the best, and I know how weird that sounds, but otherwise I'd never have found Rowan. But it's been too bloody much for him too.” My voice cracked. I lifted my hands to my face in utter shame. Maybe kindly Bill would put my weakness down to the anaesthetic. “He's gone. I thought he'd be here when I woke up but... of course he isn't. How could I have asked him? It's too much, if I'm broken from the bloody waist down. It's too much to ask of anyone.”

Bill sat back. I observed this through a blur between my fingers. He was smiling faintly. Desolation chilled me. For all his compassion, he could be a tough sod when he had to. “Oh, Vince.”

“What?”

“First off—you lost Jack Monroe because he couldn't cope with having run out on you down on the Sunderland quays.”

I choked faintly. Since Jack had confessed to me, I'd held his secret as tightly as a priest. “You know about that?”

“Yeah. I thought so all along—he was never that good of a liar. But he took me for a pint one night the other week, and out it all came. He said he'd already told you. As for him being lost—yes, he's going back to his Californian senator next week, but right now he's down in the cafeteria with your sister, her kids, Chrissy Wilkinson and your baby niece. They all came to see you, but of course you've been asleep. She's a bit of a poppet, that little one, isn't she?”

She was. Rowan and I had been to see her and Chrissy twice since the trial ended. She was called Suzi, in honour of Phil's lifelong rock-legend crush on Suzi Quattro, and Chrissy had informed me with disgust that she most resembled me. In spite of this affliction she was cheerful and affectionate. In one world, the world I didn't dare find out was utterly gone, Chrissy had given us permission to add her to the troop of Jane's kids and take her out. Already I loved her, and just now I didn't give a damn. “Yeah. She's great. Did you... Did you hear from Rowan at all?”

“Would that be the poor bugger who's crashed out asleep next door because he sat up all night while you were in surgery? Oh, speak of the devil.” A door creaked nearby, and Bill got to his feet. “Good luck with happy Harry, Rowan. He's all yours. I'm off to get some breakfast.”

I kept my hands clamped to my face. That was safest. Rowan had his own scent too, a lot subtler than Bill's. It was oilpaint and turpentine from his work, salt like a warm sea breeze, the faintest touch of the dizzying musk that rose up when we were fucking and carried me off in its wings. I breathed it. I felt the shift of the mattress when he sat down by my side. I still wasn't wholly convinced of his presence, so when he took hold of my wrists and eased them down, I allowed it.

There he was. He had hollows under his eyes. He was still flushed from sleep, his hair in spikes. “I heard you talking to Bill,” he said unsteadily, not letting go of my hands. “I stayed awake till you were round from the anaesthetic. Then I met Jane and the kids in the corridor, and Chrissy and Suzi, and I took them down and got them coffee, and I came back up, but

you were still asleep. At least... the doc said you might be playing dead for a while. To give yourself time to think.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I went to lie down next door. I must’ve dropped off.”

“I didn’t know you were here. If I had, I wouldn’t—”

“Where else would I be?”

It was such a simple question. I couldn’t answer without insulting him, so I shut up. He took his time about refreshing my water glass, straightening my sheets. “The baby’s doing well. Chrissy says she put on two pounds last week.”

“That’s nice.”

“Oh, and the landlord of that second flat we saw called me back. The one with the garden that goes down to the edge of the Dene. The other people who wanted it have pulled out, so we could have it if we liked.”

*That’s nice.* I was going to say it again. I pressed my lips together. *That’s bloody wonderful* would have been more appropriate, because we’d both loved that place—a huge sunny apartment in a quiet street, one room already being used as a studio. We’d consigned it to the near-miss list, because another couple had got there first.

And although the tenancy included use of the garden, it was on the second floor. We hadn’t talked about that. “We couldn’t afford the rent on that one, could we? I mean... we could, but he wanted a month down, a month deposit and a month for privilege of looking at his shiny face, as I remember.”

“Yeah. He’s a bit more reasonable now he’s had a fall-through. Anyway, I—I sold a picture.”

I sat up. “Damned if you did!”

“Yeah. The big canvas I did in your flat. The one where I got carried away and continued it onto your sofa.”

*City Gods.* I’d sat and watched, in danger of being painted myself, while he’d conjured that up. He’d had nothing stronger than a cup of PG Tips, but still he entered a kind of trance for his art, oblivious to distraction and soft furnishings. He’d taken the view of the city I’d stared at for so long and transformed it, the concrete and the walls rising up to form the lower limbs of two young sky gods, embracing between the arcs of the Langring bell tower and the Tyne Bridge. I’d suggested he open an online gallery, and he’d

shyly agreed, expecting nothing. “That's brilliant. But I love that painting. I almost wish it hadn't sold.”

“I'll make you another. Vince, you sat up.”

I glanced down at myself. I'd pushed upright without thinking, bracing my hands to the mattress. And there'd been no thought because for the first time in half a year there'd been no pain. “Okay,” I said faintly. “But it doesn't mean I can... That might be all I can do.”

“It's time to find out.”

I curled up. That didn't hurt either, and I made the most of it, lacing my fingers defensively behind my head, burying my face on my knees. He didn't push. Instead he came to sit beside me on the bed, as if we'd been at home, not in a busy post-op with staff and visitors passing in the corridor outside. Bill hadn't closed the door behind him. Rowan put an arm round my shoulders. “You're frightened you're not cured.”

I couldn't speak. I ducked my head once, and he ran his fingertips down the back of my skull, lightly scratching at my nape the way I loved.

“I didn't tell you much about St Mary's. My last bash at getting clean.”

I didn't understand the subject change but I was glad of it. We'd talked about almost everything else during our safe-house confinement. If for some reason he could talk to me now, I was listening—raised my head a little to show him.

“It was a bitch. Withdrawal turns you into someone you wouldn't recognise, a rabid bloody animal you'd shoot if you found it in the street. You start off calm and sedated in a nice white dressing gown, and eight hours later you're swinging a chair at the bars on your window and screaming at anyone who'll listen that you'll suck them off and give them every penny you've got in the world if they'll just let you out.”

I swallowed dryly. “Oh, Jesus. Rowan.”

“I'm not just saying this to freak you out, love. I'm telling you because I'm not cured either. I never will be. And no matter what they have or haven't done to fix your spine, nor will you. You might be able to walk and do all the stuff you used to, but you'll never be the same cop. Will you?”

I thought about it. I thought about Bill Hodges' hard-arsed young rookie. Bill was too polite to say so, but that had been me when I'd started at Mansion Street. I'd changed over the years, but not enough. I'd still relied

on rage and bitterness to get the job done. “No. I don't know what sort I'll be. But not that.”

“And I'll never be the kid I was before Val Foster got her hands on me, the one who thought he was being wicked as hell if he nicked a sherry from his dad's cocktail cabinet. Beyond a certain age—a certain amount of damage—I don't think there *are* any cures. Just...” He put both arms round me, so tight that my ribs popped, tight enough to make me see stars. “Just the day that we're in, and the chances that come with it. Come on, Vinnie, sweetheart. Take the chance.”

“I love you.” I hadn't said it to him yet and now it tore from me, raw with my fears. “But I can't. I can't!”

“I love you too. Do you remember when you stopped me jumping off the bridge?”

“Am I likely to forget?”

“You told me I could paint when I was sober. You said I could dance that way, too.”

“So?”

He got off the bed. I waited for retreating footsteps, the closing click of the door. Who could possibly bear me like this? But there was only a warm silence. When I raised my head to look, he was waiting for me, one hand outstretched. “So?” he echoed. “I will if you will.”

I could have wept at his beautiful stupidity. I couldn't even get out of bed—I was almost, almost certain of that now. A tiny shred of me was still unsure.

And while that part was making up its mind to die, my body reacted on its own. I flashed back to the basement car park where I'd first seen Rowan dance. My memory discarded the thuds and the vibe of the bass and picked out from the music its *Bittersweet Symphony* phrase, the twelve-note melody that put fear and pain to bed, resolved all tensions to a sunny moment, a hand reaching out for another human hand. I pushed back the bedsheets and surged upright. “Easy!” he gasped, reaching to catch me, but I didn't need it—I was fine. I walked into his arms, and he couldn't hear the music in my head but he moved as if he did, wrapping an arm around my back, seizing my hand into his. “There you go. Oh, thank God. Thank God.”

Footsteps scraped in the corridor. I didn't care. I was in my lover's arms, dancing to silent music in the sun. He was clasping me, barely moving, but the world was swaying all around us in response, an unimaginable waltz. I didn't resist when he drew me to a halt. We could just stand here if he wanted—all day and all night, if he wanted. For me that would still be a dance. “Vince,” he said softly. “Jack's here.”

I turned, not letting go of his hand. I wasn't quite as steady as I'd thought—the lack of pain was making me dizzy, barely subject to gravity's pull. There in the doorway was my handsome ex. He was pale, as if I might have given him as well as Rowan a sleepless night, and I couldn't interpret the expression in his eyes. “Jack,” I said lamely. “Bill told me you'd been here. I didn't—”

“Jesus, Vince, you make it hard for a man to act like a decent loser.” Before I could reply, he leaned his shoulder on the frame and turned his attention away from me. “He wouldn't even open his eyes for me, Rowan Clyde, or whatever you're called. So I go downstairs for a coffee and come back to find him dancing.”

“Jacky, don't speak to him like that.”

His ironic smile faded. He'd never been much good at sustained bitterness. “Sorry,” he said, pushing his hands into his pockets. “You don't know the things that are going to turn you into an arsehole until they come along. Look, I... just came to give you something, Vince. Bill told you I was going back to America, right?” I nodded. “Well. My mum told me she'd sell all my stuff at a boot fair if I didn't take it out of her spare room, and when I was going through it, I came across this. Do you remember?”

He was holding out a small glass paperweight. It was the counterpart of mine, the little crystal mountain with its tiny mountaineer that had sat on my desk in Mansion Street. We'd done the Scafell Pike climb together, stood at the top like kings of the world, as if nothing could ever bring us down. “Yes. Of course I remember.”

“Bill said you'd ditched yours. But I knew everything was going to turn out all right for you, even if you didn't, so I brought this in to remind you of all the stuff you'll be able to do again now. You, er... You seem to have made a good start.”

I took the paperweight from him. I didn't let go of his hand. With Rowan still steadying me from behind, I reached up and kissed him—just once, but

properly, for everything we'd been through and for goodbye. He closed his eyes and held me for a few mute seconds. Neither of us knew what the hell more to say. He released me, gave me one last quick smile and walked out.

I returned to my dance with my lover. I tried, anyway. But I was suddenly exhausted, and I settled for leaning into his embrace. He propped me, rubbing his cheek against mine. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. But you're right—not everything can be cured." I'd loved Jack, and it killed me to let him go like this, filled with a pain I'd never thought to cause and now could never ease. But I didn't want the taste of him on my lips any more. Only Rowan's—only Rowan now. I lifted my mouth to find him, and he kissed me with the tentative ferocity that belonged to him alone.

He moaned, drawing my hips forward, pushing against me. We noticed my response at the same time. Surprise and hot amusement flickered between us, summer sheet-lightning, promise of wild weather to come. Rowan broke into his soft, wicked chuckle, raising the hair on my nape. "No, no cure for everything. But some things turn out fine. Come on, handsome—back into bed."

"I'm okay."

"I know you are. But I can hear your sister and the kids on their way, and that little gown of yours doesn't *quite* cover your assets. Oh, God, Vince—that beautiful backside..."